



Rising heat is becoming a 'public health crisis' for workers, says WHO

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TORONTO – The World Health Organization says climate change-driven heat is a “public health crisis” for workers around the globe and experts say Canada is no exception.

The WHO and the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) released a joint report on Friday saying outdoor workers in construction, farming and other physically demanding jobs are at especially high risk of heat stroke, dehydration, cardiovascular damage and kidney dysfunction.

The report noted that people working indoors in hot, humid conditions are also vulnerable, especially if heat is radiating off of machinery, such as in manufacturing plants.

“The workers keeping our societies running are paying the highest price,” said Rudiger Krech, the WHO’s director of environment, climate change and health said in a news briefing in Geneva.

“These impacts are especially severe in vulnerable communities with limited access to cooling, health care, and productive labour policies.”

Glen Kenny, University of Ottawa research chair in environmental physiology, contributed to the international report and said people may think Canadian workers aren’t as vulnerable as workers in hotter parts of the world, but that’s a mistake.

“In Canada unfortunately, we have these weather extremes. We go from cold to hot. And so our bodies essentially lose that [heat] adaptation during the winter period,” he said in an interview.

The report said the risk of heat exhaustion increases when the core body temperature rises beyond 38 C.

Employers could plan shifts and workloads so that the most physically demanding tasks happen during cooler times. They could lower the intensity of work in periods of high heat, either by reducing the pace of work or incorporating more breaks, the report said. Whenever possible, workers should wear clothing that allows heat to escape, while meeting safety requirements.

Kenny said heat coping strategies should be tailored to each worker, including those who are older, have health conditions or are less physically fit.

Construction workers eat popsicles to keep cool at their worksite in downtown Montreal in June 2024. CHRISTINNE MUSCHI, THE CANADIAN PRESS