



Working environment

What is the issue?

Dairy farmers are regularly exposed to the full range of climatic conditions, including extreme heat and cold.

Why is it an issue?

Exposure to these temperature extremes can make it difficult to work effectively and may increase the risk of ill health and accidents.

What are the consequences of ignoring it?

Working in hot conditions can lead to heat stress. This can result in heat stroke, tiredness, headaches, nausea, loss of concentration, muscle cramps and dizziness. Increased sweating leads to the loss of body fluids and reduced heat tolerance, which will affect a person's ability to work and perhaps make them more prone to an accident.

Diagnosing and treating heat stress

Mild to moderate heat stress in you and your workers could produce these symptoms:

- reduced energy;
- small loss of appetite;
- nausea;
- heavy sweating;
- thirst;
- faintness;
- headache;
- confusion; and
- lightheadedness.

These symptoms can be treated on-site by giving the sufferer more fluids to drink, removing excess clothing and making them rest.

Signs of more serious heat stress are:

- throbbing headache;
- mental confusion;
- irritability;
- breathing difficulties;
- quickening heartbeat;
- dry skin (no sweating);
- vomiting;
- diarrhoea;
- muscle cramps; and
- lack of co-ordination.

Any worker showing these symptoms should receive emergency medical assistance.

People who are overweight, medically unfit or unhealthy can be more susceptible to heat stress.



How safe is your dairy now?

When assessing the risk of temperature and environmental variations around the dairy, consider these issues:

- outside temperature;
- humidity;
- air movement;
- level of natural light;
- type of clothing being worn;
- a person's size, fitness and acclimatisation;
- levels of physical activity;
- radiant temperature of the surrounds;
- how long a person works for at a time;
- how dehydrated a person is (e.g. before working); and
- how recently a person has eaten and drunk adequate fluids.

Remember that the condition of you and your workers will change over time, so that what was once a minor risk could become a real issue. For instance, as people age they lose some flexibility and muscle strength, and their weight may also increase, making it harder to work during extremes of temperature.

What can be done right now?

Whenever possible, avoid working when conditions are very hot or cold, and work at a comfortable pace.

Provide fresh drinking water in work areas and don't let people work when dehydrated or unwell. In hot weather, schedule regular drink breaks so that everyone can re-hydrate.

Make sure that no one works outside without sun protection – shade, hat, UV protection sunscreen, long-sleeved shirts, long trousers and suitable sunglasses.

In cold weather, provide suitable Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), such as gloves, lined safety footwear, and insulated or thermal clothing.

Ensure that your PPE is suitable for the working conditions it is being used in and does not impede movement, or become a hazard in itself. For instance, long sleeves provide UV protection, but unless buttoned at the wrist, they may expose the wearer to entanglement hazards near machinery.

New workers need to be made aware of the hazards of working in extreme temperatures, and may require additional supervision until they are used to the type of work.

What are the next steps?

Create a work plan for extreme temperature days. It could include a job rotation system to reduce each person's exposure to heat or cold.



Safety in the Dairy - Hazard sheet

Whenever possible, avoid working in high temperatures, high radiant heat or humidity, and when conditions are very cold. Workers and managers need to be aware of, and watch out for, the signs of heat stress and hypothermia, and be prepared to act on them immediately.

Modifications in or around the dairy that might improve the working environment include:

- a verandah to shade the northern side of the building;
- air ducts/fans in the dairy's roof or end walls;
- shade/windbreak of trees to protect the most exposed sides of the shed; and
- a water spray to cool the cows and dairy.

What you should be considering longer term

Many environmental issues can be addressed when designing a new dairy. For instance:

- reduce the chances of physical stress by allowing for direct and indirect protection from the environment;
- design a shed that provides direct protection from the wind and draughts, but allows adequate ventilation;
- include windows, blinds and doorways that can be opened and closed to control the entrance of sunlight and wind;
- include some form of insulation in the building; and
- make sure the outside walls reflect sunlight.

What actions are not optional

Clean drinking water should be available in the dairy and carried when working away from the dairy, especially on hot days.

Those taps that do and don't supply drinking water should be clearly identified.

People trained in first aid and first aid kits need to be available at the dairy.

Where to go for more information

WorkSafeVictoria Working in heat	www.workcover.vic.gov.au
Code of Practice for Workplaces	www.worksafe.vic.gov.au
Workplace Health and Safety Queensland The risks of working in the sun and heat	www.dir.qld.gov.au