

# Summertime Heat & Health: Prevention Is the Best Medicine

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Folks boast of their dark tan; many think a dark tan looks healthy, but in reality, skin cancer is the most common of all cancers. The main cause of skin cancer is overexposure to the sun, even here in the Northeast. We may even be more susceptible. Much of our weather is a combination of sun and clouds, so when the sun does shine, we peel off the clothes to take full advantage of it.

Our body's natural defense against damaging ultraviolet radiation from the sun is a pigment called melanin; however, even the darkest skin does not contain enough melanin to prevent damage resulting from exposure to the sun.

Farmers have an increased risk of skin cancer, due to the hours spent working in the sun. Remember, the sun's rays are brightest between 10 AM and 3 PM. There are a few preventive steps you can follow to protect your skin from skin cancer.

A wide-rimmed hat is recommended over the ever-popular "baseball" cap that many of us wear. They provide a sun shield for not only your eyes, but also for your ears, neck, and shoulders. These are all common locations of skin cancer outbreaks.

Fabric provides an excellent source of protection against the sun. Darker colors, though warmer, tend to block more sun. Some clothing manufacturers are beginning to put Sun Protection Factor (SPF) ratings on their clothes. You should look for a rating of 15 or higher. Generally, a tighter weave of fabric gives more protection. For example, denim jeans have an SPF of 1,700. A hat should have a 4-inch rim all around, or a broad bill and flap to cover your ears.

Sunscreen is the best way to protect any exposed skin. It is important that you use the right SPF for you.

There are two factors to consider. First, how many minutes can your unprotected skin be in the midday sun before it begins to redden and burn? Second, how many minutes will you be working in the sun? You can then figure the minimum SPF rating sunscreen you need to apply ( $SPF = \text{Minutes to be spent in the sun} \div \text{Minutes before skin reddens}$ ).

Always use a sunscreen with a minimum rating of 15. They are available at 30, 45, and higher. If you sweat heavily, use a waterproof or sports sunscreen.

You should apply sunscreen 20 to 30 minutes before going outside to give it time to penetrate your skin and protect your cells. It does not last all day, check the label to see how often you should repeat the application. Also, the sun's rays can reach through thin clouds, so apply sunscreen even on a cloudy day.

Your lips are also at risk, so use an SPF lip balm to provide protection for them.

Finally, when you purchase farm equipment, consider the benefits of features such as enclosed cabs or sun shades. Your skin's health is vitally important to your overall health.

It was 9:30, I had been working for three hours already, the humidity was high, the air hot and close. I had a headache, and I began to pant and feel nauseated. My skin felt hot and dry; I was near collapse. I had only had a small sip of water all morning. My friends called the emergency medical service. The emergency personnel came and immediately administered first aid. Later, they said I nearly died.

Heat stroke is a serious illness caused by overheating. It is life threatening, and must be treated as an emergency. Symptoms include dry, hot, red or

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spotted skin. The victim becomes extremely weak and may lose consciousness, but with rapid, strong pulse. If not treated immediately, it can lead to convulsions, brain damage, and death.

### ***First Aid***

Put the person in a cool or shady area, and fan them to promote cooling. An air conditioned tractor cab may be just what the doctor ordered. Remove the victim's clothing, and sponge the skin with cool water. Call an ambulance immediately.

### ***Prevention Is the Best Medicine***

Who is a prime target? Overweight and elderly persons, small children, diabetics, alcoholics and drug users, people with high blood pressure, and people taking certain medications. Precautions should be taken when working in hot, humid environments such as in the field or in hot, confined spaces with poor ventilation.

Heat stroke can be largely avoided by following basic health and safety practices. Get enough sleep every night. Your body needs adequate rest, and this is especially true for farm-workers and others who do manual labor. Eat a good breakfast before going to work. Like a tractor, our bodies need fuel to function properly.

Dress appropriately for the warm weather. A long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and wide brimmed hat give the best protection from the sun. Clothes made of cotton are cool and allow air to circulate on the skin's surface.

Drink plenty of water during the day. Our bodies lose water from sweating, and the water lost must be replaced constantly. Provide an adequate water supply in the field, and take breaks often to get a drink. If you are feeling thirsty, you have waited too long. It is best to carry a water bottle with you. Do not drink beer or other alcoholic beverages; the alcohol actually dehydrates your body.

Take breaks to cool off and rest. This will extend your energy and will actually increase the amount of work done each day. If you feel dizzy, weak, or overheated, stop working and go to a cool place. Sit or lie down, drink water, and wash your face with cool water. If you do not feel better soon, notify your boss or supervisor so you can be treated properly.

We can always find excuses for failing to take all these preventive measures. But remember, it is as much your responsibility to protect yourself, as it is your employer's. Everyone should be aware of the conditions that cause heat stress and do what is necessary to prevent it, and know how to deal with its symptoms.

As farm workers, we need strong, healthy bodies to work. We should strive to keep them in top shape.

