

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

NATA Task Force: The ATs' Role in Implementing Heat Stress Mitigation Strategies in the Occupational Setting

The National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Task Force: The Athletic Trainer's Role in Implementing Heat Stress Mitigation Strategies in the Occupational Setting provides evidence-based best practice recommendations to guide athletic trainers (ATs) working in industrial and occupational settings. As environmental heat exposure continues to increase across the United States and globally, employers and occupational health professionals are facing growing challenges related to worker safety, health, and productivity. This document was developed to help organizations implement practical heat stress mitigation strategies while emphasizing the unique and expanding role of athletic trainers as members of the occupational health and safety team.

Occupational heat stress is a significant and growing public health concern affecting both outdoor and indoor workers across industries. More than 13 million workers in the United States are exposed to extreme heat during summer months, and heat-related illnesses and injuries remain substantially underrecognized and underreported. Unlike athletes, manual employees often face prolonged environmental heat exposure across consecutive work shifts while wearing PPE, performing sustained physical labor, and having limited control over work pace, rest opportunities, and cooling access. These occupational demands create a unique combination of intrinsic and extrinsic risk factors that may increase susceptibility to heat stress, injury, and illness. Heat stress has been associated not only with exertional heat illness, but also with increased risk of workplace injuries, cardiovascular events, cognitive impairment, and decreased physical work capacity. Additionally, heat exposure has major operational and economic implications, contributing to reduced productivity, increased absenteeism, workers' compensation claims, and substantial financial losses for employers.

The task force assembled a multidisciplinary panel of experts in occupational health, thermal physiology, public health policy, athletic training, and occupational safety to develop actionable recommendations for heat stress mitigation. Using a modified Delphi process, the panel established 48 evidence-informed recommendations organized into five primary areas:

1. accessibility of educational materials
2. heat's impact on productivity
3. the athletic trainer's role in prevention
4. the athletic trainer's role in identification and treatment
5. the athletic trainer's role in return-to-work following heat illness.

The recommendations emphasize the importance of proactive and comprehensive heat safety programs that include environmental monitoring, heat acclimatization procedures, hydration strategies, body cooling interventions, emergency action planning, and evidence-based treatment protocols for exertional heat illness. The document also highlights the importance of workplace-specific planning, communication strategies, employee education, and the use of administrative and engineering controls to reduce heat strain and support workforce productivity.

A major focus of the document is the recognition that athletic trainers are uniquely qualified to lead and support occupational heat safety initiatives. Athletic trainers possess extensive expertise in

heat illness prevention, environmental monitoring, emergency preparedness, physiologic monitoring, recovery, and return-to-activity progression. These competencies position ATs as valuable members of interdisciplinary occupational health teams capable of helping employers implement effective heat stress mitigation strategies while improving worker health and operational outcomes.

Importantly, the recommendations acknowledge that heat stress mitigation is not solely a medical issue, but also a workforce sustainability and productivity issue. Research has demonstrated that heat stress can impair physical and cognitive performance, reduce work output, and increase economic burden on organizations. By integrating evidence-based prevention and response strategies into occupational settings, organizations may reduce heat-related illness and injury risk while supporting employee well-being, operational continuity, and productivity.

As regulatory attention surrounding occupational heat exposure continues to expand, including proposed federal heat safety standards from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), this task force document provides timely guidance for employers, occupational health professionals, and athletic trainers seeking to implement comprehensive heat safety practices. Ultimately, the document reinforces the critical role athletic trainers can play in protecting workers, supporting organizational safety culture, and advancing evidence-based occupational health practices in increasingly hot working environments.