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TAKING THE HEAT

Info for the
end-user.

BY JON PACKMAN

The Met Office predicts this spring and summer will once again bring us above average temperatures. It's too early to say exactly how much excessive heat we're in for, but nonetheless, expect another warm year. Scientists believe there is a 60% chance that the average surface temperature will match or exceed the current record from 1998.

Great news for students and beach bums, but for the rest of us desk-bound folk it could mean a gruelling few months in the office sweat shop.

Despite the fact we all know that temperatures are rising, there's still no maximum limit in law above which we can all go home for the day. The TUC is calling for a maximum working temperature of 30 degrees centigrade, or 27 degrees for those doing strenuous work. It says that when the heat hits the maximum, employers should reduce the temperature, and that workers, whose exposure to heat cannot be reduced, should be provided with adequate breaks and offered job rotation.

Employees suffering in sweltering workplaces run the risk of fatigue, dizziness and fainting, extra strain on the heart and lungs, and heat cramps due to loss of water and salt. Associated with this is the likelihood of irritability and higher stress levels, which could bring the threat of violence, say campaigners. In addition, hot, dry air can increase the risk of eye and throat infections, and breathing problems such as asthma and rhinitis.

Consequently, this summer's expected heat could make for a difficult environment that, besides from the risks presented to workers, should be of concern to employers because of the effect on productivity. Furthermore, The TUC warns that if employers fail to keep workplaces cool, they could be liable if a member of staff falls ill because of the heat, or has an accident at work because they are feeling tired or faint.

Current health and safety regulations place a duty on employers to make sure that the inside temperature is 'reasonable' during working hours. If the temperature gets too hot then the regulations say that employers must take action to reduce the heat by introducing air conditioning or distributing fans, providing plentiful amounts of cold drinking water, moving staff away from windows or allowing them to dress down.

But it's not only ourselves that need protecting these days. The office equipment being used now means a massive increase in the amount of heat generated, creating loads that older cooling systems weren't intended to handle. We've seen an explosion in the number of desktop PCs, printers and faxes, as well as computer servers, rooms full of telecommunications equipment and so on. Now, without proper cooling, equipment that's as essential to the smooth and profitable running of a business as its employees can start to break down. Today, people and buildings are more reliant on air-conditioning, whereas in previous years it was seen as something of a luxury.

This growing problem for man and machine is compounded by the fact that many office windows can't actually be opened. Heat-generating office equipment and people's expectations of a comfortable workplace mean that the hire of additional air-conditioning and climate control equipment is an increasing trend in the FM marketplace. A common solution is a desk or stand fan, but these are ineffective at cooling the air above 27 degrees. Failing an air conditioning system, the next best option may be to provide portable air cooling cabinets, which can reduce the air temperature by up to

six degrees. Another way to reduce heat gain via windows is to use reflective film or blinds.

One of easiest and most effective ways to minimise the risks of working in excessive heat is simply to drink plenty of water. Regardless of whether the weather is hot or not, the Workplace Health, Safety and Welfare Regulations 1992 says that an adequate supply of wholesome drinking water shall be provided for everyone in the workplace. Many offices now choose to provide a drinks dispenser or a water cooler. If you have one, it's important that this is regularly cleaned and tested for contamination, as they

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easily become breeding grounds for bacteria. It also says the employer has to provide cups, unless it is a drinking jet. In the case of non-disposable cups, a facility for washing them should be provided nearby.

Of course, as more water is drunk and the heat causes us to sweat, toilet and washroom facilities will be in more demand throughout the summer than at any other time of year. Traditional toilet tissue and hand towel systems can generate considerable waste, so it's worth ensuring that there are cost-efficient dispensing systems in place. More importantly, bacteria can thrive in hot temperatures and

washroom hygiene should be of paramount importance. Drying is particularly crucial here as wet hands collect and transmit bacteria more easily than dry hands. More advanced equipment, while it may require a larger outlay in the short term, can provide significant cost-in-use savings and improved hygiene.

While we seem to be very capable of having an affect on climate, humans have yet to find a way to control the weather. In the meantime it's case of doing what we can to make conditions as comfortable as possible, and with this year set to be another scorcher it's worth preparing for it now. ■