

Managing Work Fatigue During Long Summer Days



Long daylight can hide a real fatigue problem

Summer creates a strange kind of safety risk. The day feels longer, the light lasts later, and workers often assume they have more capacity than they really do. A crew may start early to beat the heat, stay late to finish a pour, take on weekend work because the season is short, or continue through an afternoon job because there are still hours of daylight left. On paper, the schedule looks productive. On site, fatigue may already be changing how people think, move, communicate, and make decisions.

That matters because fatigue is not just feeling tired. CCOHS describes fatigue as a state that may involve mental, physical, and subjective tiredness, including reduced mental capacity, inattention, indecision, weakness, drowsiness, and sleepiness. CCOHS also says fatigue can be considered a form of impairment and a workplace hazard. For Canadian OHS leaders, that should change the conversation. Fatigue during long summer days is not merely a wellness issue, a lifestyle problem, or something workers should manage privately after the shift. It's a foreseeable hazard that needs to be assessed, controlled, supervised, and reviewed like other hazards that affect safe performance.

The summer risk is often underestimated because fatigue does not always look dramatic. Workers may still be standing, talking, and completing tasks. But the quality of hazard recognition can decline before anyone says they are exhausted. A worker may miss a traffic cue, forget a step in a lockout procedure, choose the wrong ladder, misread a signal, underestimate heat exposure, skip hydration, rush cleanup, or continue driving when they should stop. Those decisions may look like individual errors after an incident, but they are often the visible end of a fatigue pattern the employer could have seen earlier.

Summer fatigue is more than heat stress

Heat is a major part of the problem, but summer fatigue is broader than heat stress. Long daylight can extend the working window. Seasonal demand can create overtime. Construction, agriculture, landscaping, roadwork, utilities, municipal operations, transportation, tourism, warehousing, and maintenance often face compressed summer schedules. Workers may also be balancing long commutes, family obligations, second jobs, recreational activity, disrupted sleep, wildfire smoke, poor indoor cooling, and physically demanding work in hot or humid conditions.

CCOHS identifies extended work hours, overtime, shift work, long periods of physical or mental activity, insufficient break time between shifts, excessive stress, high temperatures, noise, poor lighting, and demanding or monotonous tasks as factors related to fatigue. It also notes that research has shown increased risk of mistakes when workers have slept fewer than five hours before work or have been awake for more than 16 hours. Those are not abstract findings in a Canadian summer context. They map directly onto early starts, late finishes, emergency repairs, seasonal

peaks, long drives, and high-pressure project windows.

Heat stress adds another layer because hot environments place extra strain on the body. CCOHS explains that very hot environments can overwhelm the body's cooling systems and lead to serious or fatal effects, including heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Employment and Social Development Canada also warns that temperature, humidity, and smog levels can increase body stress, and that heat stress can contribute to musculoskeletal injuries, heat stroke, and death when combined with physical job demands. In practical terms, a worker may not just be tired because the day is long. They may be tired because their body is working harder to regulate temperature while still performing the job.

Heat, fatigue, and judgment are connected

Employers sometimes manage heat and fatigue as separate topics. One toolbox talk covers hydration. Another covers sleep. A third covers safe driving. But on long summer days, these factors combine. Heat can increase physical strain, dehydration can worsen concentration, poor sleep can reduce reaction time, and schedule pressure can push workers to continue when they should pause. The hazard is not just one factor. It's the interaction between them.

Ontario's heat stress guidance states that heat stress can get worse when combined with physical work, loss of fluids, fatigue, and pre-existing medical conditions. Alberta's OHS guidance on extreme heat notes that the body needs time to adapt to hot weather and that this acclimatization can take four to seven working days, depending on the individual. WorkSafeBC's 2026 heat-stress reminder also identifies job demands, humidity, radiant heat, limited air movement, protective clothing, hydration, fitness level, and certain medications as factors that may increase susceptibility to

heat-related illness.

These details matter because the same summer day does not affect every worker the same way. A new worker, an older worker, a worker returning from time away, someone taking certain medications, a worker fasting or dehydrated, a worker in heavy PPE, or someone doing high-exertion work in direct sun may be at higher risk than a co-worker doing lighter work in shade. A defensible fatigue and heat-stress program must account for that variation without requiring workers to disclose private medical details unnecessarily. The workplace can still design controls around exposure, task demand, acclimatization, hydration, rest, and supervision.

The risk increases when the schedule looks reasonable but the work does not

One of the most common summer fatigue failures is assuming that a shift is safe because it fits within a normal schedule. The real question is not only how many hours were scheduled. It's what workers were asked to do during those hours, under what conditions, and after what rest. Eight hours of light work in a cooled environment is different from eight hours of outdoor labour, roof work, confined-area maintenance, highway repair, firefighting support, waste collection, mobile equipment operation, or physically demanding field work in heat and humidity.

The same applies to overtime. A two-hour extension may seem minor if it completes the job, but the risk depends on the work occurring in those last two hours. If the final tasks involve driving, lifting, traffic control, electrical troubleshooting, crane support, working at heights, lockout, line breaking, or equipment operation, the fatigue profile matters. Critical tasks should not automatically be pushed

into the hottest or latest part of the day simply because the schedule slipped.

Summer work plans should identify when fatigue risk rises. That may include early starts after late finishes, more than one long day in a row, high heat and humidity, heavy PPE, high-exertion work, long drives, work after emergency callouts, new-worker assignments, night or weekend work, and tasks requiring sustained attention. Those triggers should lead to practical controls, not just reminders to be careful.

Supervisor observation is a control

Supervisors are central to summer fatigue management because fatigue often shows up first as small changes in performance. A worker may become slower, irritable, unusually quiet, forgetful, clumsy, confused, or more willing to take shortcuts. A crew may stop communicating as clearly. A driver may arrive late and seem unfocused. A new worker may try to keep pace with experienced workers while quietly overheating. These signs can be missed when supervisors focus only on production, weather delays, and task completion.

A good supervisor does not need to diagnose fatigue. They need to recognize that fatigue may be affecting safe work and know what to do next. That may mean stopping a high-risk task, moving work to shade, rotating the worker, adding a break, reassigning duties, checking hydration, delaying a drive, increasing observation, or escalating to first aid when heat illness is suspected. The key is to treat fatigue signs as risk signals rather than attitude problems.

This is also where the employer's culture matters. If workers believe they will be judged for saying they are tired, overheated, dizzy, or not fit to continue, they may keep working until the risk becomes serious. Supervisors need to make early reporting normal. A worker who reports fatigue before an incident should be seen as participating in

prevention, not failing to endure the shift.

Hydration and breaks are necessary but not enough

Water, shade, and rest breaks are essential, but they should not be the entire fatigue strategy. WorkSafeBC's July 2026 reminder to employers says both indoor and outdoor workers can be at risk during hot weather and identifies controls such as cool drinking water, regular rest breaks, shaded or cooled recovery areas, scheduling strenuous work during cooler parts of the day, improved ventilation and cooling in indoor areas, worker rotation, training on early signs of heat stress, and encouraging workers to report symptoms early. Those are practical controls, but they must be planned and enforced rather than left to individual judgment.

The reason is simple. When crews are behind, workers may delay breaks. When workers are proud, they may ignore symptoms. When supervisors are busy, they may not notice that the shaded rest area is too far away, the water supply is warm, or the hardest task is being done during peak heat. When incentives reward speed, workers may see breaks as lost time. A written policy that says workers should hydrate and rest will not control fatigue if the work system quietly punishes the behaviour the policy recommends.

A stronger approach builds hydration and rest into the work plan. Recovery areas should be accessible. Water should be easy to get. Physically demanding tasks should be scheduled thoughtfully. Break timing should respond to heat, humidity, work intensity, PPE, and acclimatization. Supervisors should actively check whether breaks are happening, especially during the first heat events of the season and during high-demand periods.

Long summer days can also create driving risk

Fatigue during long summer days often follows workers onto the road. This is a particular concern for field technicians, sales and service workers, municipal crews, construction supervisors, delivery drivers, inspectors, utility workers, emergency-response workers, and anyone driving after a physically demanding shift. A worker who gets through the task safely can still be at risk during the drive back to the yard, the hotel, the client site, or home.

Employers should treat summer driving as part of the fatigue plan. Long drives after extended shifts, early departures after short sleep, late returns after hot outdoor work, and multi-site days should trigger review. Supervisors and dispatchers should have authority to adjust routes, delay non-urgent travel, require rest breaks, or arrange accommodation when the safer decision is not to drive.

This matters for due diligence because fatigue-related driving decisions are often built into scheduling. If the employer assigns a long day of physical work followed by a long drive, it should also consider whether that plan creates foreseeable impairment. The answer is not always to cancel the work, but the employer should be able to show it considered the risk and used reasonable controls.

Incident investigations should ask about fatigue

Fatigue is often under-investigated. After an incident, the report may identify a missed step, poor communication, loss of balance, equipment contact, procedural deviation, or worker inattention. But unless the investigation asks about hours worked, sleep opportunity, heat exposure, hydration, workload,

breaks, travel, overtime, weather, PPE, and schedule pressure, it may miss why the mistake happened.

CCOHS recommends including fatigue as a possible factor and related causes of fatigue when investigating incidents. That is an important best practice because fatigue rarely announces itself as the root cause. It appears through behaviour, timing, conditions, and decisions. If investigations do not look for it, the employer may respond with retraining when the real control should involve scheduling, staffing, rotation, rest, heat controls, supervision, or task planning.

Near misses should receive the same treatment. A worker who almost drops a load late in the day, nearly backs into equipment, forgets a critical step, or reports dizziness should not be dismissed because no one was hurt. These events may be early warnings that the fatigue controls are not strong enough.

What a practical summer fatigue plan should include

A practical summer fatigue plan should start with a hazard assessment that looks at the work, not just the weather. Employers should consider heat and humidity, radiant heat, PPE, task intensity, shift length, overtime patterns, commute or travel demands, work-rest cycles, acclimatization, new-worker status, staffing levels, indoor cooling, wildfire smoke interactions where relevant, emergency callouts, and high-risk tasks scheduled late in the day.

From there, controls should be built into operations. That may include moving strenuous work to cooler periods, adding workers or rotation, increasing breaks, providing shaded or cooled recovery areas, improving ventilation, setting maximum work periods for high-exertion tasks, adjusting driving expectations, limiting consecutive long days, using check-ins

for lone or field workers, increasing supervision during heat events, and requiring reassessment when conditions change.

Training should support the plan, but it cannot replace it. Workers need to recognize early symptoms of heat stress and fatigue, understand how to report concerns, know that reporting will be supported, and understand when to stop or escalate. Supervisors need more detailed instruction on how to adjust work, recognize performance changes, verify controls, respond to symptoms, and document decisions.

The JHSC should see summer fatigue patterns

The joint health and safety committee or health and safety representative should not see only injury totals after the summer. They should see leading indicators while the season is underway. Useful indicators may include heat-stress reports, fatigue reports, near misses late in the day, overtime trends, missed breaks, high-temperature work, new-worker assignments, first-aid cases, hydration or rest-area concerns, and corrective actions related to heat or fatigue.

This information helps the committee identify whether controls are working. If workers are reporting dizziness, headaches, cramping, late-day mistakes, or near misses during peak heat, the response should not be limited to another reminder. The committee and employer should ask whether work timing, staffing, supervision, recovery areas, water access, acclimatization, and break enforcement are adequate.

The value of JHSC involvement is that it connects worker experience with system-level prevention. Workers often know when the plan is not working. They know whether the break area is too far away, whether water is being replenished, whether supervisors discourage reporting, whether new workers are trying to keep up, and whether the toughest jobs are still

being scheduled in the hottest part of the day. That practical feedback can prevent a summer hazard from becoming a serious incident.

The better standard for long summer days

Long summer days can make unsafe work feel manageable for longer than it should. There's more daylight, more seasonal pressure, and often more willingness to stretch the day. But daylight does not reset the body. It does not replace sleep, reduce heat load, eliminate dehydration, or restore judgment after extended work.

Canadian employers should manage summer fatigue as a predictable OHS hazard. That means assessing the combined effect of heat, workload, hours, breaks, sleep opportunity, travel, PPE, supervision, and task risk. It means making rest, hydration, rotation, scheduling, and stop-work authority real on the job, not just in the policy. It also means treating fatigue signs, heat symptoms, and near misses as early warnings that deserve action.

The safest summer workplaces will not be the ones that simply remind workers to drink water. They'll be the ones that design the day so workers can stay alert, recover, report concerns early, and perform critical tasks when they are fit to do them. Managing fatigue during long summer days is not about slowing down the business. It's about preventing the moment when a tired worker, a hot environment, and a rushed decision become the next incident.