Sun, Safety, and Summer Gear: A Canadian OHS Manager’s Playbook

Every June, workplaces across Canada see two simultaneous shifts: temperatures climb and dress-code debates heat up. Employees want to swap heavy layers for shorts and tank tops, but OHS managers know that too-casual attire can expose workers to serious hazards—from chemical splashes to heat stroke.

Balancing comfort with compliance isn’t just a HR headache; it’s an essential safety challenge. In this guide, we’ll explore:

1. **Why summer attire matters.**
2. **The science of heat, UV, and PPE.**
3. **Real-world mishaps and a cautionary tale.**
4. **Best practices for summer-ready PPE & dress codes.**
5. **Communicating and enforcing policy.**

1. Why Summer Attire Matters

When the mercury rises, employees naturally reach for the lightest clothes in their closet. But in many environments—construction sites, labs, warehouses—shorts, flip-flops, and sleeveless shirts leave skin unprotected and workers vulnerable.

- **Chemical & splash hazards**: A worker in a sleeveless top

handling hydraulic fluid can suffer severe burns if fluid sprays.
- **Impact & abrasion risks**: Exposed shins and wrists are easy pickings for sharp metal or falling debris.
- **UV exposure**: Prolonged sun on uncovered skin causes sunburn, accelerates skin aging, and increases skin cancer risk.

Even offices aren’t immune: stray sparks in a welding bay, leaking chemicals in a lab, or broken glass in a shipping dock can all become serious injuries when skin isn’t covered.

2. The Science of Heat, UV, and PPE

Heat Stress & Clothing

Your clothing both protects and traps. Loose, airy fabrics might cool you, but they can also wick away nothing. Conversely, heavy PPE layers block sun and hazards but can trap heat, driving core temperatures upward.

Key points:

- Moisture-wicking shirts (e.g., polyester blends) can draw sweat away and dry quickly.
- Lightweight, high-UV-protection-rated fabrics (UPF 30+) shield skin from sunburn.
- Ventilated hard hats and mesh gloves reduce heat buildup.

UV Radiation

UV-B rays cause sunburn; UV-A rays penetrate deeper, contributing to skin aging and cancer. In Canada, sun intensity peaks June–July, especially at higher latitudes where sunlight bounces off water, snow, and concrete.

Protection strategies:

- Broad-brim hats or hard-hat brims.

- Long-sleeve shirts with built-in UPF rating.
- Sunscreen (SPF 30+) on all exposed skin, reapplied every two hours.

3. A Cautionary Tale: When Cool Clothes Go Wrong

Case Study: Calgary Construction Crew
Last July, a multi-story construction in Calgary allowed workers to wear shorts under a “heat stress policy.” One journeyman, eager for relief, wore loose-fitting board shorts. During a routine cleanup, a nail gun misfired and penetrated his lower leg. The nail punctured a major artery, and despite immediate first aid, the worker lost significant blood before EMS arrival. Recovery required extensive surgery and months off work.

Lessons learned:

- Even “innocent” attire choices can turn catastrophic when paired with tools.
- A formal “shorts ban” was instituted—except for designated non-hazard zones.
- The company invested in light, long-leg cooling gear and mandated its use on engineering review.

4. Best Practices for Summer-Ready PPE & Dress Codes

4.1 Conduct a Summer-Specific Risk Assessment

Before lifting the “blanket” policy, re-evaluate:

- Which tasks truly need full-coverage PPE?
- Where can you allow modified attire (e.g., supervised lunch areas)?
- What new hazards (UV, heat, insects) emerge in summer?

4.2 Update Your Dress-Code Policy

Be explicit. A good policy spells out:

- **Mandatory coverage**: e.g., long-pants, sleeved shirts, closed-toe footwear in all operational zones.
- **Allowed zones**: e.g., break areas where shorts/T-shirts are okay.
- **PPE modifications**: e.g., ANSI-certified mesh gloves, ventilated helmets.

4.3 Invest in Climate-Friendly PPE

Many manufacturers now offer:

- **Breathable coveralls** with moisture control.
- **Cooling vests** with phase-change materials.
- **Mesh-vented hard hats** and respirators with exhalation valves.
- **Anti-UV face shields** for outdoor welding.

4.4 Implement Heat-Stress Controls

Beyond clothing:

- **Scheduling**: Early start-times, shaded breaks during peak sun (11 a.m.–3 p.m.).
- **Hydration stations**: Electrolyte-enhanced water and cool mist fans.
- **Buddy system**: Monitor for heat exhaustion signs.

4.5 Sun & Chemical Protection

Combine sun safety with chemical PPE:

- **Chemical-resistant sleeves** (e.g., nitrile) under UPF garments.
- **Sunscreen** approved for industrial use (non-greasy, long-lasting).

5. Communicating & Enforcing Your Summer Safety Policies

5.1 Engage Employees, Don’t Dictate

A top-down mandate seldom sticks. Instead:

- **Listen**: Survey staff on comfort, hazards they worry about.
- **Pilot** new PPE in small teams to get feedback.
- **Recognize** compliance with “Cool & Safe” incentives (cool drinks, extra break time).

5.2 Train & Educate

Use multiple formats:

- **Toolbox talks** on summer safety hazards.
- **Hands-on demos** of new cooling PPE.
- **Digital posters** in breakrooms illustrating proper attire.

5.3 Visual Reminders & Signage

- **Color-coded zones** on floors: red = full PPE mandatory; green = casual attire OK.
- **Infographics**: layering for sun/chemical/abrasion protection.

5.4 Consistent Enforcement

- **Spot checks**: supervisors do quick daily rounds.
- **Documentation**: record violations and corrective discussions.
- **Progressive discipline**: verbal warning → written reminder → suspension.

5.5 Measure & Adapt

- Track June–August injury data year-over-year.
- Survey workers on heat stress, comfort, PPE

satisfaction.
- Adjust policy annually based on lessons learned.

Conclusion

Long, sunny Canadian summers bring both joy and risk. As OHS managers, you have the power to turn that extra daylight into an opportunity for enhanced safety—by crafting clear policies, investing in innovative summer PPE, and communicating with empathy.

Remember: **Comfortable workers who feel listened to are far more likely to stay safe**. With thoughtful risk assessments, robust training, and climate-sensitive PPE, you can ensure every team member stays cool, covered, and compliant—even when the sun’s blazing.