



Singapore may not be able to keep the warm weather in check, but it can take steps to mitigate the risks faced by workers in sectors such as construction and landscaping, says the writer. It can also draw some lessons from what other countries are doing to protect their workers from rising temperatures. ST PHOTO: SHINTARO TAY

Spare a thought for outdoor workers as temperatures rise

Heat stress is a growing problem as the earth warms. Should legislation to keep vulnerable workers safe be considered?

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Temperatures are soaring around the globe. Thus far, 2023 has been the second-hottest year on record behind 2016, and the heat could rise further. Vietnam recorded its hottest temperature of 44.1 deg C in May. In the same month, temperatures in Singapore soared to 37 deg C. With the El Nino weather pattern, which brings hot and dry weather to the region, entrenching itself in the second half of 2023, there is no respite in sight.

The problem is that, even in these uncomfortable conditions, many workers have to work outdoors under the blazing sun. This can hurt their productivity and raise business costs. But above all, it can put the workers' health at risk, with heat injuries a growing concern. Singapore may not be able to keep the warm weather in check, but it can take steps to mitigate the risks faced by workers in sectors such as construction and landscaping.

It can also draw some lessons from what other countries are doing to protect their workers from rising temperatures.

HOT-BUTTON ISSUE

Both businesses and workers are being hurt by the climbing mercury.

At a conference on "occupational heat stress" held in Doha, Qatar, in May, the International Labour Organisation highlighted that an estimated 2 per cent of total working hours will be lost worldwide each year as heat stress reduces worker productivity.

The effects are already visible here. A recent report in *The Straits Times* highlighted that workers in the construction and logistics sectors had to take longer breaks during the hottest parts of the day, and then work longer hours to keep projects on track. Some businesses reported a drastic increase in electricity consumption as they tried to keep their premises cool and their employees comfortable.

Despite efforts by individual firms, the number of heat injury cases in Singapore increased from two per week between January and April to four cases per week since May for hospitals under the National University Health System. Other hospitals like Khoo

Teck Pui Hospital saw heat exhaustion cases rise to five in May from one in April.

Among the more vulnerable groups of workers facing the likelihood of heat stress are delivery riders. These workers spend long hours exposed to heat as they cycle or ride motorbikes for their deliveries.

Delivery riders do not have the option of pacing themselves, as they are paid based on the number of deliveries. The rush to fulfil orders to gather as many incentives as possible and to achieve basic targets is an area of great concern as well, due to fatigue from long hours of riding in rising temperatures.

In Singapore, delivery platform companies like Grab and foodpanda send reminders through their apps to alert riders to the risk from heat and remind them to stay hydrated. Deliveroo even provides water for riders at delivery-only kitchens and encourages merchants to offer drinks to riders in hot weather.

LESSONS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

For ideas on what more can be done, we can look at the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where temperature can climb up to 50 deg C during summer months.

Food delivery companies in the UAE have introduced various wellness and safety initiatives to beat the heat. Deliveroo UAE implemented its scheduling optimisation measures that ensure riders are not scheduled to work more than two hours during the midday peak hours, so they can effectively manage their daily workload.

The same company provides cooling vests designed to lower the temperature the body is exposed to by up to 15 deg C, and has also started installing windshield visors on motorbikes to protect riders from weather conditions and improve their visibility.

Various delivery platforms in the UAE have introduced air-conditioned and shaded rest areas, as well as air-conditioned buses and vans, so that riders can cool down and hydrate between orders.

In partnership with Pakistan Association Dubai, a social welfare organisation, resting areas with a cafeteria and medical centre will provide riders with free medical check-ups, physician counselling with preventive tips, and management for rehydration and summer safety.

The steps to mitigate heat stress are not limited to warm countries. Canada, for example, has occupational heat exposure limits legislated at the state level as part of workers' basic protection. Canada is also proposing federal legislation focusing specifically on heat stress, given the rise in global temperatures. Similarly, in Japan, the Labour Standard Bureau has in place a Governmental Notice for Prevention of Heat-related Illnesses.

WHAT SINGAPORE CAN DO

As temperatures rise, Singapore's Workplace Safety and Health Council could encourage companies to implement workplace risk analysis. To keep their workers safe, companies could look at the working climate, including the air temperature and how close to a heat source a worker is deployed. They could also look at a worker's age and medical condition, and other factors that may affect his tolerance of heat.

Singapore's population is ageing, and older workers do not adjust as well as their younger colleagues to sudden changes in temperature and are at greater risk of heat stress. It may be worth considering putting older workers on shorter shifts, more indoor work cycles, as well as more frequent and longer cooling breaks.

Singapore's employers have already put some measures in place. They may be encouraged to invest more in cooling apparatus and other measures to protect their workers from heat stress, once they realise that these can actually make their workers more productive, apart from keeping them safe.

It is important for companies to regularly communicate and consult with their workers and with experts on how to manage risks working in hot conditions. Even the condition of their housing and dormitories must be looked at, because these can affect how quickly workers recover from the heat stress they face during working hours.

Workers who suffer injuries, such as heat stroke, from exposure to excessive heat at work can already make claims under the Work Injury Compensation Act. Gig workers will be covered only in the latter half of 2024.

In the interim, local delivery platforms do provide their riders with income protection insurance in the case of accidents so that riders receive income as they are recovering. However, basic income protection should also be provided for heat stress illnesses among workers.

But all these are piecemeal measures. What Singapore may eventually need to address this growing problem is a law dealing specifically with heat stress at the workplace. The problem will not go away, so we need to act.

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