Face Masks and Heat

Summer is here, and heat-related hazards have already been addressed, but now we have the potential additional risk posed by face coverings used in the workplace to combat COVID-19. While wearing face coverings in the heat we might need to move a little slower, take a few more breaks, and hydrate more often.

Use of Facial Coverings to Combat COVID-19
In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, OSHA issued its Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19. The Guidance reiterates that employers must supply workers with effective personal-protective equipment (PPE) to protect against exposure to COVID-19 and perform an assessment of their workplace to determine what types of PPE will be necessary to protect against exposure. Such PPE may include masks, face shields, gloves, and in some cases respirators. In Washington state, businesses are required to follow the Safe Start plan which requires the usage of face masks while working. In addition to DOSH and OSHA, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) recommends the use of a cloth-type face covering to slow or prevent the spread of COVID-19. The CDC recommends that the mask include multiple layers of fabric to ensure efficacy.

Face Coverings and Increased Risk of Heat-Related Issues
There could be potential risks associated with wearing cloth-type face coverings in warmer weather. Wearing masks during hot and humid summer months can make it difficult for air to reach a person's lungs, causing the person's respiratory muscles to activate, resulting in shortness of breath. This bodily reaction can cause heat to build up more quickly within the body. Moreover, wearing a mask typically causes a person to take more frequent breaths and some experts have warned that strenuous or vigorous physical activity should be avoided.

Tips for Preventing Heat Stress And COVID-19 Exposure
Employers trying to combat heat-stress risks for employees wearing face coverings may encounter additional challenges given the rise in body temperature that may be associated with wearing a mask. If employees are working in an office-setting, air conditioning may be a feasible option to lower the risk of heat exposure.

Employers whose work is primarily outside and labor-intensive face significant challenges. These employers should follow DOSH's heat-stress guidance in a more robust and frequent manner. For example, employers should consider the following:

- **Take more frequent, brief, break periods** to avoid developing heat-stress and heat-related illnesses.
- During breaks, find air conditioning or a shaded environment.
- Employees should remove their masks during secluded breaks (such as a break in a personal vehicle) to permit the employee to breathe freely and potentially lower their core temperature (if local and state guidelines are followed).
- Wear work clothing that is both breathable and wicking in nature.
- If the mask gets sweaty or damp for any reason, you should change the mask.
    - A damp mask can cling to your face and be uncomfortable.
    - Use a breathable fabric, like cotton, as opposed to a polyester that can retain heat.
    - Light colors are better; black absorbs heat and will make you feel hotter.
    - Consider keeping at least one mask on hand to swap out in this case.
    - Wash the mask after each wearing. It will feel better and be safer.
- If you find yourselves struggling to breathe you should take a short break.
    - It helps if you can take a little bit of a break, distance yourself from people and lift the mask up a little bit, cool yourself off.
- Stay hydrated. Dizziness or a racing heart could be a sign of heat exhaustion.
  In that case, get out of the heat, remove your mask, and seek medical care.
    - Signs of heat illness include confusion, dizziness or lightheadedness, high body temperature, fainting, loss of consciousness or muscle cramps, particularly while wearing face coverings.

Follow guidelines for heat safety and stay hydrated.
https://lni.wa.gov/safety-health/safety-training-materials/workshops-events/beheatsmart#questions-and-answers