

Iowa Farmer Today

Preventing heat stress on the farm this summer

By Tabitha Kuehn

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Staying hydrated and taking breaks during the hottest part of the day helps prevent heat-related illness on the farm.

Photo courtesy of I-CASH

Summer on the farm brings long hours, high temperatures and plenty of hard work. It's a season that demands a lot from those who make our living outdoors.

I have had many days of waking up extra early to tackle fencing jobs while the morning air was still cool and the sun hadn't yet burned off the dew.

Those early starts weren't just practical, they were a matter of comfort and safety.

By mid-afternoon, when the heat had settled in thick and heavy, I'd find a shady spot with a popsicle in hand, thankful the hardest work was behind me.

That kind of daily planning — working in the morning and resting during the hottest part of the day — might seem like a small adjustment, but it can make a big difference in preventing heat-related illness.

Farming doesn't slow down just because the temperatures rise, but it's important to recognize when to shift gears to protect your health.

Heat illness isn't just an off-chance risk. It's something that can affect even the most experienced, toughest folks if the warning signs are missed or ignored.

The reality is that heat-related illness can sneak up quickly. It often starts with subtle signs: feeling unusually fatigued, lightheaded or nauseated.

If these symptoms are ignored, they can progress into more serious conditions like heat exhaustion or even heat stroke, which is a medical emergency.

Heat stroke occurs when the body can no longer regulate its temperature, leading to confusion, rapid pulse and unconsciousness.

It is a situation no one wants to be in and one that can often be avoided with a little preparation and awareness.

Hydration remains one of the most effective and accessible ways to prevent heat illness. Drinking water regularly throughout the day — before you are even thirsty — is essential.

Once you're dehydrated, it becomes much harder for your body to cool itself.

Plain water is ideal, though during long days in the sun, adding in a drink with electrolytes can be helpful.

Energy drinks and soda might be tempting, but they do not provide the same benefits and can sometimes do more harm than good in hot conditions.

The timing of work is another important factor. When possible, plan strenuous or outdoor-intensive tasks in the early morning or late evening, when temperatures are lower.

It's not always easy to rearrange the farm schedule, but even small shifts can make the day more manageable and safer.

When afternoon work is unavoidable, be sure to take regular breaks in a shaded area and use those pauses to cool down and rehydrate. It might seem like a waste of time in the moment, but it can save hours of recovery later.

Clothing plays a role in keeping your body temperature in check as well.

Loose-fitting, light-colored clothing helps reflect sunlight and allows for better airflow, while wide-brimmed hats provide much-needed shade for your face and neck.

Sunscreen might not prevent heat illness directly, but it helps prevent sunburn, which can make it harder for your body to cool itself naturally.

If you are managing a team, whether it is hired help, family members or neighbors, heat safety should be part of the daily conversation. Encourage everyone to speak up if they are feeling off and make it clear that taking breaks and staying hydrated are not signs of weakness but smart choices that keep everyone productive and safe.

A quick check-in during water breaks can go a long way in spotting early signs of trouble.

Do not forget about your animals either. Livestock can suffer from heat stress just like people.

Ensuring they have access to clean water and shade not only keeps them healthy but also reduces stress-related behavior that can pose risks to handlers.

When animals are uncomfortable or overheated, they are more likely to be unpredictable, making everyday chores more dangerous.

Farm life does not always offer the luxury of taking a day off when the thermometer spikes. But what we can do is work with the heat instead of against it.

That means building safety into our daily routines, listening to our bodies, and adjusting our pace when needed.

Those early mornings in the pasture and popsicle-filled afternoons were not just about beating the heat. They were about knowing when to push and when to pause.

Tabitha Kuehn is the outreach coordinator for Iowa's Center for Agricultural Safety and Health at the University of Iowa College of Public Health.

