Heat and health: a perspective from the public sector and the military

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Heat is, by far, the leading weather-related killer in the United States, as well as most mid-latitude developed nations. Awareness of heat as a major health problem has only recently increased, and in this country over 1,500 people die from heat-related afflictions in an average summer. There has been a concerted effort by the National Weather Service, the Department of Labor, the Department of Defense, and other federal agencies to lessen the number of heat-related deaths and illnesses. For the elderly and outdoor workers in the public sector, new sophisticated heat watch/warning systems have been established and are being monitored by the National Weather Service to call excessive heat warnings. In addition, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has developed extensive guidelines to lessen the negative health impacts of heat on outdoor workers.

From a military perspective, heat is both a killer and a deterrent to personnel who must work under hostile weather conditions often in harsh desert environments. Thus, the Army is developing new and innovative means of dealing with heat stress on personnel, and is moving toward a system to warn supervisors when excessive heat may be harmful to soldiers in the field. This includes both a sophisticated warning system and an effective intervention response.