



Respiratory Protection—A Matter of Life and Breath

When it comes to personal protective equipment, certain requirements must be met for it to do its job properly—the job of guarding its wearer from injury or illness. Whether the item is safety shoes or safety glasses, it must be the right type for the particular job. And it must fit properly.

The same criteria apply to respiratory protection, and there is an extensive set of OSHA regulations—revised early in 1998—governing how employers decide when to require it and how they make sure the criteria is met.

Basically it's a matter of evaluating all the tasks performed by a company's workers and determining which of them call for some level or form of respiratory protection. To a minor degree, all forms do the same job: They assure that the wearer gets sufficient oxygen but does not inhale noxious dusts, sprays, gases, fumes, chemical vapors, and so on. But they are not interchangeable.

A simple dust mask worn over nose and mouth, along with safety goggles, may provide adequate protection for a sander in a wood shop. But it would not be appropriate for a firefighter or other person entering an IDLH atmosphere (one that is immediately dangerous to life or health). So, management must purchase the right type of respirator, certified for their particular uses as the result of testing by NIOSH—the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. In addition a respiratory protection program should include the following:

- Getting a medical evaluation for every employee required to use a respirator. This must be done by a physical exam, through use of a health questionnaire, or a combination. The purpose is to get a recommendation from the physician or other licensed health care professional on the employee's ability to use a respirator. Primarily this relates to any physical conditions that would make respirator wear inappropriate for the individual (such as respiratory ailments, overweight, past heart conditions). It also takes into account the type and weight of the respirator and the atmosphere in which it will be used—any temperature or humidity extremes, for example.
- Arranging for any necessary follow-up medical examinations—such as if there is a significant change in workplace conditions or the physical effort required of the user.

- Conducting, or arranging for, fit testing of any tight-fitting facepiece an employee is required to use. This will be repeated at least annually and whenever there's a change in the employee's physical condition that could affect the fit—such as a visible change in body weight.
- Providing for the care of the respirators: cleaning, disinfecting, and storage in an accessible area that will protect them from damage, contamination, and the adverse affects of sunlight, dust, chemicals, or extreme temperature or moisture.
- Delivering thorough and clearly understandable training for all employees required to use respirators—before use and at least annually thereafter. It will include why the respirator is needed, the importance of proper fit, use, cleaning and maintenance, any limitations of the equipment, and what to do in any emergency situation such as malfunction.

Respirators are an effective method of protection against designated hazards when properly selected and worn. Respirator use is encouraged, even when exposures are below the exposure limit, to provide an additional level of comfort and protection for workers. Procedures need to be followed if you are required to use one in the future. Then when the time comes, you can breathe easy.

HOW THIS TOPIC APPLIES TO THIS JOB:

ATTENDEES: Print Name / Signature (use back if necessary)

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