

Respiratory Protection

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES ON THE USE OF RESPIRATORY PROTECTION

Airborne hazards are very dangerous, whether they are in the form of a solids that can be reduced to particulates like asbestos fibers, welding fumes, vapors, respiratory droplets (that can carry viruses or toxic gases). Like all personal protective equipment (PPE), respirators are a last resort because the hazard is still present and all solutions to eliminate or reduce hazards must be considered first. Employers must perform a hazard assessment in order to select the proper respirator based upon the specific hazards present and the respirator's limitations.

The OSHA/PEOSH Respiratory Protection Standard (1910.134) requires employers to:

1) Develop and maintain an effective respiratory protection program.

The written program must describe how respirators will be selected and used and must describe how all regulatory requirements will be met. A respiratory protection program administrator, qualified by experience or education, must oversee the program to ensure worker protection.

2) Select appropriate respirators.

Selection is based upon the type and concentration of the hazards in the workplace. If the concentration of the hazard cannot be determined, the employer must consider the work area where the airborne hazard is present to be immediately dangerous to life and health (IDLH). All respirators must be approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), and marked accordingly. The employer must establish the maximum use concentration (MUC) for every hazard requiring respirator use, which will keep the hazard below the permissible exposure limit (PEL), inside the facepiece. Employees must be allowed to choose from different sizes and models of respirators that fit them comfortably. If air-purifying respirators (APR) are used, the employer must establish a filter replacement schedule. APR filters have a limited life span, are diminished by environmental factors and are not for use in IDLH OR oxygen deficient atmospheres.



EMPLOYER REQUIREMENTS

3) Medically evaluate all employees required to use a respirator.

Wearing a respirator requires a medical evaluation completed under the direction of a qualified medical professional using the questionnaire from the regulation.

Questionnaires must be confidential and completed during normal work hours. The employee may be sent for a physical based on the answers. The employer is only entitled to know whether or not the employee is medically able to wear a respirator and if there are any restrictions on its use.

Medical evaluations are required:

- annually before fit-testing,
- if the employee reports medical symptoms from wearing the respirator or if observations during use show additional evaluation is needed,
- when changes in the workplace put additional stress on the user,
- if the medical professional, supervisor or program administrator make observations that another evaluation is needed.

4) Perform fit-testing for affected employees. A “Fit Test” is a formal procedure completed by the employer before an employee is issued a respirator. Fit testing determines if a specific respirator can form an adequate face piece-to-face seal for the user, and must be performed at least annually.

- There are several fit-testing methods the employer is allowed to use.
- Several makes and sizes of respirators must be offered to ensure a good fit.
- Must be repeated if there is any changes to the face shape such as weight loss.

5) Employers must provide training for employees before they are required to use them and at least annually as long as that employee wears one. Once trained, respirators users must be able to explain the:

- Requirements of the respirator regulation.
- Reason the respirator is needed,
- Limitations of the respirator and what to do if it fails.
- How to inspect, put on, fit check, wear and remove the respirator.
- How to maintain and store the respirator.
- Any health effects that can be caused by wearing a respirator or from the substances it is protecting the worker from.

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VOLUNTARY USE

Employers must establish procedures for voluntary use of respirators. Voluntary respirator use is allowed when respirators are worn for exposures below permissible exposure limits. For voluntary use of filtering face piece respirators the employer must provide the employees with the information from Appendix D of the regulation. **This is the only use of respirators in the workplace where a written program is not required.** If respirators with rubber face pieces and removable filters will be worn the employer must also make sure the employee is medically able to wear the respirator and that the respirators are properly cleaned, stored and maintained. A written program describing how that would be done is still required even though the employer is not requiring the use of the device.

Knowledge is power—but collective action saves lives.

At CSEA, transforming knowledge into action is central to our mission of protecting workers. When hazards and close calls are documented and reported, they can be addressed before they cause harm. That’s how we prevent injuries and illnesses—by making sure problems don’t get ignored.

Your voice and vigilance are essential. Now more than ever, we need your help to ensure every workplace is safe, healthy, and accountable.

THE LIFE YOU SAVE COULD BE YOUR OWN!