

Respirators protect workers against hazards such as insufficient oxygen environments, harmful dust, fog, smoke, mists, gases, vapours and sprays. These hazards have the potential to cause both immediate and long-term effects such as lung damage, cancer, other diseases or even death. Employers should have a written respirator program that describes the proper procedures for the fit, care and use of respiratory protection.

Fit Testing

For proper protection, a worker must ensure the respirator they are using fits and functions properly. This means the equipment must be the proper size and it must seal to the face. A fit test is to be conducted by a person properly trained in fit testing to ensure the correct size. A fit test is required before a worker uses any respirator for the first time and it must be conducted on at least an annual basis. Fit tests may need to be performed more frequently if there have been changes to a worker's body such as a significant gain or loss in weight or facial changes such as dentures or broken jaw bone.

Seal Check

Workers must perform a seal check before using the respirator each time they put it on. Use the positive and negative seal tests outlined in the respirator safety manual to verify the seal. Regular seal checks are necessary to ensure that contaminated air or particles will not leak into the respirator. If it doesn't fit or seal properly, don't use it!

Facial Hair and Respirators

It is critical to your health and well-being to ensure that you have a proper seal when wearing a respirator for protection. This means that workers need to be clean shaven before their shift begins, and possibly even part way through a shift as beards, sideburns, mustaches, and stubble prevent a good seal and are not permitted with respirator use. Facial hair is much larger than the size of the particulate you are trying to protect yourself from. If you do not have a proper seal due to facial hair, you won't be properly protected as smaller particles such as fibres and fumes will be able to pass through.

Choosing The Right Respirator

Choosing the right respirator to protect workers from airborne contaminants is essential. Respirators may not protect you from all contaminants as different contaminants require different protection. It is essential to be familiar with the limitations of each respirator type before using it.

General precautionary information can be found in the manufacturer's operating manual. In some cases, it may be necessary to seek the assistance of an experienced safety professional or occupational hygienist who is familiar with the actual workplace environment and contaminants.

Types Of Respirators

- Disposable particulate respirators provide minimum protection and are typically used to protect against dust and fumes.
- Full-mask and half-mask air-purifying respirators use cartridges and particulate filters. Air-purifying respirators only work if you use the right cartridge and/or filter for the specific contaminant. Mechanical filters will block solid particles while chemical filters soak up substances.
- Supplied air respirators can come in a variety of forms such as self-contained breathing apparatuses, air hoods, full body suits and airlines or powered air-purifying respirators.

The Key To Respiratory Safety

It is vital to recognize all the chemicals, materials and hazards you may be exposed to as well as conduct frequent hazard assessments and workplace inspections to help identify and control those hazards.

A plan must be implemented to protect the health of all workers by assessing the environment, implementing engineering controls, having safety data sheets available and choosing the right respiratory protection and other personal protective equipment for specific hazards.

Protect your health and familiarize yourself with the Occupational Health & Safety Regulations:

7-3. Respiratory protective devices.

7-4. Inspection of respiratory protective devices.