

Breathe Easy With Respiratory Protection



Safety Talk

Okay, you've got your hardhat, gloves, safety glasses and respirator; now you're all set for the job. But are you really protected from the hazards?

When it comes to personal protective equipment, certain provisions must be met for it to do an effective job of guarding its wearer from injury or illness. Whether it's safety shoes or earplugs, it must be the right type. It must also fit properly. This particularly applies to respiratory protection. Remember, a respirator that is not fitted and worn correctly is about as much good as no respirator at all.

A respiratory protection program should start by evaluating all the tasks at work to determine which of them call for some level of protection.

Respirators assure that the wearer gets sufficient oxygen but does not inhale noxious dusts, sprays, gases, fumes or chemical vapors. But they are not interchangeable. A simple dust mask worn over the nose and mouth, along with safety goggles, may provide adequate protection for a sander, but it would not be appropriate for a person entering a toxic atmosphere.

You must have the right type of respirator, certified for its particular use. Follow these steps:

- A medical evaluation is needed for every employee required to use a respirator. This is done by a physical exam and a health questionnaire. The purpose is to identify any physical conditions that would make the wearing of a respirator wrong for an individual.
- Follow-up medical examinations are necessary if there is a significant change in workplace conditions.
- Employees should undergo fit testing of any tight-fitting face piece they are required to use. This should be repeated at least annually and whenever there is a change in the employee's physical condition that could affect the fit.
- Employees should know how to care for their respirators. This includes cleaning, disinfecting and proper storage to protect the respirator from damage, contamination and the adverse effects of sunlight, dust, chemicals, moisture or extreme temperatures.

- Employees should receive thorough training before they are required to use respirators. Training should be ongoing as necessary, at least annually. These sessions should include the use, cleaning and limitations of the mask and what to do in an emergency situation.

Being trained and properly fitted for respirator use is critical for your health and safety on the job. It could literally mean the difference between life and death in a hazardous environment.