

Respiratory Protection Program



The fundamental goal of any respiratory protection program is to control occupational diseases and injuries caused by breathing air contaminated with harmful dusts, fogs, fumes, mists, gases, smoke, sprays, and/or vapors. The defense against these contaminants is simple: Keep them out of the air that workers breathe. Always implement engineering and/or administrative controls first. If contaminants still present a hazard, you must provide appropriate respiratory protection for every employee who might be exposed to them.

When to use the Respiratory Protection Program

Generally, you are required to establish a respiratory protection program whenever you or OSHA requires your employees to wear respirators. For example, you may need to establish a respiratory protection program:

- If your employees work in situations where the level of oxygen is insufficient or potentially insufficient.
- If your employees are potentially exposed to harmful levels of hazardous gases or vapors.
- If your employees are exposed to other potential respiratory hazards, such as dust, airborne biological hazards, mists, fumes, sprays, and other airborne particles.

Employers must follow the requirements of NIOSH and OSHA regulations, both the general regulations that apply to all workplaces and the specific regulations for exposures. According to program details in 29 CFR 1910.134, standard operating procedures governing the selection and use of respirators provide several key fundamentals in selecting a respirator. **These are:**

- A written plan detailing how the program will be administered;
- A complete assessment and knowledge of respiratory hazards that will be encountered in the workplace;
- Procedures and equipment to control respiratory hazards, including the use of engineering controls and work practices designed to limit or reduce employee exposures to such hazards;
- Guidelines for the proper selection of appropriate respiratory protective equipment;
- An employee training program covering hazard recognition, the dangers associated with respiratory hazards, and proper care and use of respiratory protective equipment;
- Inspection, maintenance, and repair of respiratory protective equipment; and
- Medical surveillance of employees.

Fit testing is a very important part of wearing a respirator. Fit testing ensures that you have an air tight seal between your face and the respirator. Imagine for a moment that you are wearing a respirator thinking it was protecting you, but the seal between the respirator and your face wasn't air tight and was allowing unfiltered air into your lungs. Anytime you are wearing a respirator you are not fit tested for, you are taking that chance! You must be fit tested annually, after major changes with your face structure, major dental work, or after a weight gain or loss of 20 lbs or more.

OSHA's Respiratory Protection Standard (CFR 1910.134) was last revised in 1998 since its original inception in 1971 (not counting the revisions affecting Tuberculosis in 2003 and 2004.) Many specifications and technical aspects of OSHA standards defer, and refer, to other standards like: ANSI, the American National Standards Institute; along with UL, ASHRAE, NFPA, ISO, NIOSH, etc.

For those employers with Respiratory Protection Programs, the new ANSI Standards on Respirator Programs now require periodic audits by a knowledgeable and objective person NOT directly associated with the program. This is required in addition to the regular Respirator Program Director or Administrator's Annual Internal Audit.