



Let your employees

BREATHE EASY

Is it time to reevaluate your respiratory protection program?

By DENNIS PATRICK, CIH, CSP, CHMM

OSHA reports that an estimated five million workers are required to wear respirators in 1.3 million workplaces throughout the United States. Respirators protect employees against air contaminants like gases, vapors and dusts, and protect employers from rising healthcare costs and workers' compensation claims. Companies that provide effective, safe and efficient respiratory protection programs do more than protect their bottom line — they help save lives.

Like any workplace standard, a respiratory protection program needs periodic evaluation. Regulations, equipment and personnel are constantly in flux. If any of the following scenarios applies to your company, it may be time to reevaluate your respiratory protection plan:

🧠 Employees have become ill and, as a result, enforcement actions have been taken against your company.

🧠 Employees have begun to voluntarily wear respirators (after meeting medical evaluation requirements) due to concerns about their personal safety.

🧠 Employees have complained about both air quality and “not feeling well.”

🧠 There are recurring illnesses at your facility.

🧠 The permissible exposure limit (PEL) has been exceeded by some gas, vapor or particulate.

🧠 The Respiratory Protection Standard 1910.134 requires respiratory

protection based upon air monitoring results for your operation.

Key questions

It's obvious that something needs to be done to address the above issues. Begin by asking these four key questions:

❶ **Are you protecting your employees?** Companies commonly believe they are in compliance with the Respiratory Protection Standard because they have written programs. But often, these same companies have little data to demonstrate that safety protocols have been achieved.

Respiratory protection has substantially improved in recent years due to better materials and uniform manufacturing methods. However, don't assume that respiratory protection in the workplace has been achieved because a respirator has been worn or was supposed to have been worn. Instead, develop quantifiable goals for your respiratory protection program and stick to them.

❷ **Does your company have an effective program?** As respiratory-related diseases may take years to develop and employees can change jobs frequently during their careers, it is quite likely that the onset of illness occurs after an employee has left your company. OSHA requirements, which compel companies to keep records for decades, help to track slow-developing respiratory diseases.

The importance of proper fit-testing, periodic air monitoring, training/mainte-

nance, compliance enforcement, employee accountability and detailed record-keeping cannot be over-emphasized as part of an effective respiratory program.

❸ **Are you collecting the right data?** The likelihood of having sound data and demonstrating an effective respiratory program is significantly increased by the collection of air monitoring data, regular medical surveillance and cooperation of employees. Employers should keep regular logs of the time their employees spend in “respiratory-protection required areas.”

❹ **What should you do differently?** Perhaps the biggest issue facing safety professionals is creating a

Potential health hazards

Ten reasons to wear respirators

- 1 & 2** COPD - Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (This includes two lung diseases: chronic bronchitis and emphysema.)
- 3.** Occupational Asthma
- 4.** Occupational Lung Cancer
- 5.** Asbestosis
- 6.** Mesothelioma
- 7.** Byssinosis (Brown Lung Disease)
- 8.** Coal Workers Pneumoconiosis (Black Lung Disease)
- 9.** Silicosis
- 10.** Hypersensitivity Pneumonitis

“great startup” program during the initial introduction. As with many EHS programs, a strong beginning, only to be followed by periods of inattention, will be to the detriment of your program. Consistency is critical to a program’s success.

If a strong respiratory program is in place, companies must make an effort to retain its quality administrators and experienced personnel. Management must be empowered to keep trained personnel to ensure, at a minimum, the requirements of the Respiratory Protection Standard 1910.134 are being met.

Enforcement of proper respirator usage, although essential, is only part of the process. Spending time training employees on the benefits of wearing respiratory protection may provide a company with the best “bang for their buck.” Additional involvement and empowerment of employees within this program can also significantly improve results.

Moving forward

Implementing a successful respiratory protection program demands the involvement of the safety or industrial hygiene professional spearheading the process, the management requiring the program and the employees living and breathing it every day. Unless everyone involved in your respiratory protection program cares, it is unlikely to succeed.

Here are five tips for implementing the program:

1 Know your employee base. Like a salesperson, you must understand the “customer” when selling a successful respiratory program. You have to sell the “why” to your employees.

2 Practice administrative and engineering controls, which can reduce the toxicity of your process and minimize the potential for airborne contaminants.

3 Train employees to build their own rationale as to why good respiratory protection

Why employees don’t wear respirators

There are underlying truths that a safety professional must embrace if an effective respiratory protection program is to be properly implemented.

- Employees do not like to wear respirators because they are often hot, uncomfortable, demand extra maintenance and can tax a person’s cardiovascular system.
- Many employees distrust the use of respirators and are not sure they work.
- Younger employees do not consider themselves at risk, convinced that their youthful immune systems are protection enough.
- Younger employees are often not bothered by workplace contaminants as much as older workers.
- Older employees who can truly benefit from the respirator may not wear it out of habit.
- Employees often prefer to trust their own senses to warn them of compromised breathing environments when, in fact, many gases and vapors have either no or minimal warning characteristics.
- Respirators can restrict vision and make the performance of “close-up” tasks a challenge. Full-facemasks that are scratched or fogged can affect both employees’ vision and job performance.
- Respirators make it more difficult to wear safety glasses, which are often required in the workplace.
- Safety glasses can “steam up” as a result of wearing poorly sealed particulate respirators, which again restricts vision.
- Some employees might believe that wearing a respirator is not important, as they do not see themselves staying in their particular job for an extended period of time.
- Many employees are reluctant to wear respirators because they find it difficult to communicate while wearing one.

is important. The closer this training is to their particular situation, the better. For example, some companies send letters from the CEO to employees’ homes with a targeted message, such as, “Your significant other came to work healthy and our company wants them to come home the same way!”

4 Learn how well employees understand the negative effects of not wearing respiratory protection. This gives you the opportunity to discuss ten diseases that can result from *not* wearing respiratory protection. (See “Potential health hazards” sidebar.)

5 Check OSHA’s Web site, <http://www.osha.gov/SLTC/respiratoryprotection/index.html>, for additional guides on creating respiratory protection

programs in the workplace.

Dennis Patrick works in the environmental safety and compliance areas of Airgas and has been with the company for six years. In the industry since 1977, Patrick is a Certified Industrial Hygienist, Certified Safety Professional and Certified Hazardous Materials Manager. He resides in Lansing, Michigan.

Airgas.
You’ll find it with us.™

For more information visit www.airgas.com