

Why Must My Company Provide Respirator Fit Testing

Application Note RFT-012

There are three fundamental reasons why organizations with workers that wear respirators must provide an annual fit test for each individual.

1–Sizing: To select a respirator make, model, and size, or verify that the make, model, and size already selected is capable of matching the unique contours of each employee’s face.

There is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all respirator. Gaps in the seal can sometimes be seen by an observer, indicating a very poor seal, but it’s impossible to look at a respirator wearer and tell for sure that the seal is tight. The only way to determine if the seal is tight is to perform a fit test. Most organizations offer a few different respirator sizes or models to accommodate the diversity of facial features in the workforce.

2–Training verification: To make sure employees are trained to properly wear the specific make, model, and size respirator that will be provided.

Just because a particular make, model, and size respirator is capable of sealing does not guarantee that it will seal. Properly adjusting a respirator such that it maintains a proper seal to the face is not as easy as it looks, even for simple N95 disposable filtering-facepiece respirators. Employees must learn how to adjust the straps, form the nose band (in some cases), and perform the specific user seal checks that result in a very good seal.

The fit test is not the training. Training must be done before the fit test. The fit test is like a final exam, where the employee proves that the selected respirator is the proper shape (for him/her) and most importantly, that he/she knows how to put it on and adjust it properly. This is why it’s so important not to help the person put the respirator on for the fit test. They must do it alone. That way, when the fit test is passed, management has a record showing that the employee learned how to do it right.

3–Compliance: Federal OSHA requires that employers have a written respiratory protection program based on 29 CFR 1910.134. This regulation requires fit testing of those employees who must wear respirators. States with their own OSHA plan are required to enforce identical or even more stringent regulations. OSHA is very active inspecting organizations for compliance. In fact, OSHA issued a total of 4,224 respiratory protection citations in 2010*. Respiratory protection was ranked #4 of OSHA’s Top 10 of Cited Violations during that time. Of those citations, 623 were for failure to conduct respirator fit testing. Many of those citations included a stiff fine.

How often is fit testing required by OSHA? All fit testing in the USA must be performed at least once per year on each individual who must wear a respirator. Those individuals who wear more than one type of respirator (for different tasks) must be fit tested again with each different respirator.

*OSHA’s Top 10”, *Safety+Health Magazine*, National Safety Council (NSC.org), December 2010.



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