

Risktopics

Face Coverings, Face Masks, and Respiratory Protection for COVID-19

Establishing appropriate workplace controls to minimize the spread of COVID-19 is critical as employees return to the workplace. While engineering controls and administrative controls should be the first consideration, PPE may be necessary.

Introduction

Preventing and/or mitigating the spread of COVID-19 amongst the workforce will rely in part on employer plans for intervention. While engineering and administrative controls are considered to be more effective for minimizing the exposure to COVID-19, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) may also be necessary when those controls are not viable. Although correctly used and proper fitting PPE can help prevent certain exposures, it should not supersede other prevention strategies.^[1]

Discussion

When deciding if employees will be required to wear face coverings, face masks, or respiratory protection, it is important to ensure engineering and administrative controls have been considered. During an outbreak such as COVID-19, recommendations for PPE and other protective measures specific to job tasks may change depending on the impact of COVID-19 in your geographical area, updates to risk assessments, and information on PPE effectiveness. Community-based factors will influence strategies that may change as things evolve.^[1] When determining PPE requirements, including whether face coverings, face masks, and/or respiratory protection is necessary, remember employees must be trained on how to correctly use the PPE and PPE must be:

- Selected based upon exposures to the worker
- Properly fitted, and refitted as applicable (i.e. Respirators)
- Consistently and correctly worn when required
- Properly maintained, replaced, disposed of ^[1]

Guidance

Guidance may vary based on the level of exposure of each workplace via community spread, the number of cases of COVID-19 in the workplace, and/or the exposure level employees face in regard to COVID-19.^[1]

To properly understand if face coverings, face masks, or respiratory protection are necessary in your workplace it is important to understand the exposure risk level (as defined by OSHA) employees face. Most non-healthcare environments will fall under the medium or low exposure risk level.

Classifying Worker Exposure to COVID-19 ^[1]			
Exposure Risk	Conditions	Workplaces in this category	PPE Guidance
VERY HIGH	Jobs with high potential for exposure to known or suspected sources of COVID-19 during specific medical postmortem, or lab procedures	Healthcare personnel, emergency responders, laboratory personnel, morgue workers (collecting or handling specimens of known COVID-19 patients, performing aerosol generating procedures)	Will likely need additional PPE, including either a face mask or respirator, depending on job tasks and exposure risks
HIGH	Jobs with high potential for exposure to COVID-19	Healthcare delivery and transport staff, medical transport workers, mortuary workers involved in preparing bodies	
MEDIUM	Jobs which require frequent and/or close contact (within 6ft) with people who may be infected with COVID-19, but who are not known or suspected COVID-19 patients and are in areas with ongoing community transmission.	Includes workers who may come in contact with general public (schools, high volume retail settings) and workers in high population density work environments	Depending on other controls in place, added PPE may be needed. PPE ensembles will vary by work task
LOW (Caution)	Jobs which do not require contact with people known to be, or suspected of being infected with COVID-19 nor frequent contact (within 6ft) of the general public	Workers who have minimal occupational contact with public and other coworkers	Additional PPE is not recommended. Should continue using what they would ordinarily use

After engineering and administrative controls have been implemented and/or considered, there still may be a need to consider additional controls such as PPE. When considering the use of face coverings, face masks, or respirators it is important to understand the differences, as well as requirements related to their use.

Understanding the Difference ^{[1] [2] [3] [4]}					
Type	What it is	What it is NOT	CDC Guidance	OSHA Guidance	Requirements
Cloth Face Covering	Intended to protect others from the wearer. Helps people who may have the virus and do not know it from spreading it to others	Not proven to protect the wearer Not considered respiratory protection	Recommended in public settings where other social distancing measures are difficult to maintain Intended for use by general public	No specific guidance for cloth face coverings	Use of this item is not regulated
Surgical Mask (Face Mask)	Protects wearer against large droplets, splashes or sprays of bodily or other hazardous fluids Loose fitting Protects others from the wearer's respiratory emissions	Does NOT provide the wearer with a reliable level of protection from inhaling smaller airborne particles Not tight fitting Not considered respiratory protection	Intended for use by healthcare and death care workers Should only be used once and not shared	No specific guidance for cloth face coverings	Use of this item is not regulated by OSHA Fit testing not required
N95 Respirator (filtering face piece)	Protects wearer by reducing exposure to particles, small particle aerosols and large droplets. Filters out 95% of airborne particles Tight fitting when worn correctly	Not intended for use by general public	Intended for use by healthcare and death care workers Should only be used once and not shared	Should be worn by workers in high and very high-risk work environments for COVID-19 such as healthcare and death care	Must follow 29 CFR 1910.134 (workers must be advised of the contents of Appendix D) Company must have a written respiratory protection program If N95 is required PPE, fit testing is required, and the wearer must be clean shaven. This requirement does not apply for voluntary use
Half Mask Respirator	More protective than a filtering face piece respirator when worn correctly, for procedures likely to generate aerosols	Not intended for use by general public	No specific guidance from CDC	Could be needed for workers in very high- and high-risk exposure work environments. Can be used when N95 respirators are not available	Must follow 29 CFR 1910.134 (workers must be advised of the contents of Appendix D) Company must have a written respiratory protection program If a half mask is required PPE, fit testing is required, and the wearer must be clean shaven. This requirement does not apply for voluntary use

Conclusion

PPE is just one element of effectively protecting workers from an exposure. When making decisions about whether face coverings, face masks, or respirators are necessary in the workplace many factors must be considered. Remember engineering and administrative controls should always be considered before resorting to PPE; PPE is the last line of defense. It is important you make a decision based on facts appropriate to your work environment and situation.

References

1. Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). [Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#); OSHA 3990-03. (2020).
2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Use of Cloth Face Coverings to Help Slow the Spread of COVID-19](#). (2020).
3. Food and Drug Administration. [N95 Respirators and Surgical Masks \(Face Masks\)](#). (2020).
4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. [Understanding the Difference](#). (2020)

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