

Respiratory Protection

by Lynn Feiner

Question: *I work for a company that is trying to upgrade its safety program. Our greatest difficulty is respiratory protection. Can you give us a quick rundown on the best way to implement a good respiratory protection program—one that will motivate people who don't think that respirators are always necessary?*

Answer: Respiratory illness can take years to develop. As with smoking, the delayed but high-risk results sometimes make it difficult, but crucial, to convince employees to wear respirators in certain environments, even if the air does not appear to be harmful. The key to convincing employees to protect themselves is to educate them on the hazards present in the workplace and the effects on the human respiratory system.

The material safety data sheet (MSDS) for the products used in the workplace includes that information. In addition, group training sessions on respirator use and maintenance, as well as the presentation of factual information on specific contaminants and their risks, provide a good foundation for a successful respirator safety program.

Respirator manufacturers are good sources of training information, which can be found on their websites, in their brochures, and in their instructional videos. For example, North Safety Products has an 11-min air-purifying respirator video outlining the basics of respiratory protection and why it is important to follow all the instructions provided by the employer. Instruction manuals packaged with respirators are valuable sources of information that safety supervisors should encourage employees to read and keep as reminders on the proper respirator use and maintenance.

To build the framework for proper implementation of a respirator program, a safety supervisor must provide individual attention during fit-testing and training sessions. It pays to follow up with periodic checks on how diligently employees are performing user seal checks, conducting respirator inspections/maintenance, and attending to cartridge



and/or filter changes.

One often overlooked point is the need to be clean-shaven. Facial hair, or anything that interferes with maintaining a tight seal, compromises effective respirator use. Periodically removing the respirator face piece in a contaminated area is tantamount to not using it at all, so if a respirator is required, it must be worn at all times.

To overcome reluctance to wearing respirators, safety directors can add a motivational dimension to the safety program. Use signage to remind workers that respirators must be worn within designated areas. Kick off a safety incentive program. Simple incentives that employees can share with family and friends work well. Managers also should consider and highlight safety records in giving raises and bonuses.

Respirator usage is a matter of getting into good habits. As with seatbelts, people can become so used to respirators that it feels unnatural not to wear one in certain environments. Over the long term, employee pride in a job safely done can make the respirator a symbol of professionalism that others admire and emulate.