

OSHA Related Guidance Regarding the Use of Masks¹

Non-respirators

Loose-fitting paper or cloth masks, or generic face coverings like a bandana or one of the DIY masks that CDC has been promoting for general use by the public are NOT considered to be a respirator. They are not considered to be PPE thus there are no requirements in a specific OSHA standard that apply.

Respirators – N95 and other ‘tight fitting’ masks

N95 masks, although they are called masks and look like masks, are actually considered by OSHA to be respirators. Use of these types of masks, whether it is required by the employer or permitted for voluntary use, triggers requirements under OSHA’s respiratory protection standard. If an employer mandates that employees wear respirators, the employer must establish a written respiratory protection program that includes numerous elements such as fit testing, medical evaluations, procedures for proper use, storage and cleaning, and training.

Voluntary Use - Employee Provided

Even if employers simply permit employees to voluntarily use N95s or other negative pressure filtering facepieces then the employer will be responsible for providing the employee with a copy of Appendix D of 1910.134. To avoid any confusion, it would be prudent to make an announcement to employees about the voluntary use of ‘tight fitting’ masks, post a copy of Appendix D in the workplace, and document your efforts to provide employees the information in Appendix D.

Appendix D to Sec. 1910.134 (Mandatory) Information for Employees Using Respirators When Not Required Under the Standard

Respirators are an effective method of protection against designated hazards when properly selected and worn. Respirator use is encouraged, even when exposures are below the exposure limit, to provide an additional level of comfort and protection for workers. However, if a respirator is used improperly or not kept clean, the respirator itself can become a hazard to the worker. Sometimes, workers may wear respirators to avoid exposures to hazards, even if the amount of hazardous substance does not exceed the limits set by OSHA standards. If your employer provides respirators for your voluntary use, or if you provide your own respirator, you need to take certain precautions to be sure that the respirator itself does not present a hazard.

You should do the following:

1. Read and heed all instructions provided by the manufacturer on use, maintenance, cleaning and care, and warnings regarding the respirator’s limitations.
2. Choose respirators certified for use to protect against the contaminant of concern. NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, certifies respirators. A label or statement of certification should appear on the respirator or respirator packaging. It will tell you what the respirator is designed for and how much it will protect you.
3. Do not wear your respirator into atmospheres containing contaminants for which your respirator is not designed to protect against. For example, a respirator designed to filter dust particles will not protect you against gases, vapors, or very small solid particles of fumes or smoke.
4. Keep track of your respirator so that you do not mistakenly use someone else's respirator.

¹ [OSHA, COVID-19 OSHA FAQs about Respirators, Face Masks, and Face Coverings, April 15, 2020](#)