

North Carolina Division of Public Health Respiratory Protection Guidance

November 2021

Measures for protecting workers from exposure to, and infection with, the novel coronavirus, COVID-19 depend on the type of work being performed and exposure risk, including potential for interaction with infectious people and contamination of the work environment. Employers should adapt infection control strategies based on a thorough hazard assessment, using appropriate combinations of engineering and administrative controls, safe work practices, and personal protective equipment (PPE) to prevent worker exposures. Some Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) standards that apply to preventing occupational exposure to infectious disease including COVID-19 also require employers to train workers on elements of infection prevention, including PPE.

<https://www.osha.gov/coronavirus/safework>

The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to employers and workers engaged in the occupational setting where the use of N95 respirators to control exposure to infectious disease including COVID-19 may reasonably be anticipated. **This document is not intended to serve as a comprehensive OSHA compliance guide.** It is intended to assist employers with protecting employees by **compliance with OSHA Respiratory Protection Standard; 29 CFR 1910.134;** <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standnumber/1910/1910.134>.

Consulting with a professional specializing in Industrial Hygiene and Occupational Health may be the best way to ensure worker safety and compliance with applicable OSHA standards.

It is important for employers to understand that the use of N95 respirators in the occupational setting is regulated by OSHA and in North Carolina, the Department of Labor Occupational Safety and Health Division (NCDOL OSH), <https://www.labor.nc.gov/safety-and-health/occupational-safety-and-health>. This requires employees who use respirators be included in a Respiratory Protection Program that includes the following elements: **Program Administrator, Medical Evaluation, Training, Fit Testing, and Written Respiratory Protection Plan.**

Resources for addressing these program elements are outlined below:

1. Program Administrator

Each employer or agency should identify a Program Administrator. This individual will coordinate the respiratory protection program and ensure documentation of the written respiratory protection plan. They should ensure a system is in place for maintaining records of medical evaluations, training, and fit test results for each employee.

2. Medical Evaluation

A medical evaluation questionnaire must be provided to each employee before they wear a respirator in the occupational setting. The following are elements of this requirement:

- Identify a physician or other licensed health care professional (PLHCP) to review the completed medical questionnaire. The reviewer may be a physician or nurse practitioner associated with the agency, but NOT a direct supervisor of the employee to be fit tested. This is to avoid *conflict of interest in providing an objective review* of the employee's medical status.
- The medical evaluation questionnaire should be considered a confidential medical record and shared only between the employee and PLHCP.
- A follow up medical examination shall be provided by the PLHCP (does not have to be the reviewer) to all employees who answer positively to any questions on the questionnaire.
- The PLHCP will determine if the employee is medically cleared to use a respirator, and consequently should be familiar with relative and absolute contraindications for respirator use.

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The OSHA required medical evaluation questionnaire questions can be found in Appendix C of 1910.134 available at: <https://www.osha.gov/laws-regs/regulations/standardnumber/1910/1910.134AppC>

The following is a link to this questionnaire in a pdf format for easy use. <https://epi.dph.ncdhhs.gov/phpr/docs/MedicalEvaluationQuestionnaire.pdf> The PHLCP will then make a determination and fill out the medical approval form: <https://epi.dph.ncdhhs.gov/phpr/docs/MedicalApprovalForm.pdf>

3. Training

Appropriate training should be provided to all employees before they wear a respirator in the occupational setting. While occupational exposure to tuberculosis may be referenced in many online trainings for respiratory protection in the healthcare setting, the same recommendations for proper use of N95s are applicable to most airborne transmissible diseases. The video located at the following link is an option for training about respirators in a healthcare setting.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6qkXV4kmp7c&app=desktop>

In addition to training on proper use of N95 respirators, employees should understand the hazards associated with potential exposure to infectious disease including COVID-19.

4. Fit Testing

A fit test is required for any employee wearing a tight-fitting respirator to protect against airborne infectious disease including COVID-19. Fit testing must be done prior to initial use and within 12 months thereafter. Once employees are medically cleared and trained, they should be properly fit tested with the same make, model, style, and size of National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety (NIOSH) approved respirator they have selected. The purpose of the fit test is to ensure a proper seal of the respirator to the wearer's face. The easiest way to accomplish this is to use an approved qualitative fit testing procedure. While there is no official certification for a person conducting fit testing, it is very important for this individual to understand the importance of performing it correctly, according to approved procedures. These procedures (such as the saccharin fit test procedure) can be found in Appendix A of 1910.134 at the following link:

http://www.osha.gov/pls/oshaweb/owadisp.show_document?p_table=STANDARDS&p_id=9780

A qualitative fit testing kit will be required to perform this procedure. Fit testing kits can be found online from numerous suppliers by running an online search using the terms "qualitative fit testing kit". Instructions should be included with the fit test kit. The following link provides instructions for qualitative fit testing from 3M but is applicable to all NIOSH approved N95 respirators: <https://multimedia.3m.com/mws/media/992396O/3m-fit-test-kit-training-video.mp4>

The PowerPoint found at the following link can be used as a resource to help with qualitative fit testing. <https://epi.dph.ncdhhs.gov/phpr/docs/FitTestingProcedure.pptx>

The employer shall not permit respirators with tight-fitting face pieces to be worn by employees who have facial hair that comes between the sealing surface of the face piece and the face.

<https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/npptl/resources/pressrel/letters/conformityinterp/CA-2018-1005-R1.html>

5. Written Respiratory Protection Plan

A written plan outlining elements of the employer's respiratory protection program should be developed and accessible to all employees. **It is important the plan accurately reflect the policies and procedures of the agency it is written for.** A written plan *template* developed for agencies using disposable N95 respirators in the health care setting is available at the following link:

<https://epi.dph.ncdhhs.gov/phpr/docs/WrittenRPPTemplate.doc>

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COVID -19 Guidance

As of July 2021 OSHA rescinded the **Temporary Enforcement Guidance - Healthcare Respiratory Protection Annual Fit-Testing for N95 Filtering Facepieces During the COVID-19 Outbreak**: <https://www.osha.gov/memos/2020-03-14/temporary-enforcement-guidance-healthcare-respiratory-protection-annual-fit>

Following OSHA, on October 15, 2021, NC DOL OSH rescinded its temporary enforcement guidance relating to use of respirators in the workplace.

Furthermore, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has revoked the Emergency Use Authorizations for use of decontaminated disposable filtering facepieces, use of non-NIOSH approved filtering facepieces and use of respirators beyond their manufacturers shelf life.

https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/letters-health-care-providers/update-fda-recommends-transition-use-non-niosh-approved-and-decontaminated-disposable-respirators?utm_medium=email&utm_source=govdelivery