



Personal Protective Equipment

At each of our discussions, there is generally one particular phase of safety being stressed. The goal is to reduce the number of disabling job injuries-which will benefit both you and the organization.

Today the topic is safety clothing and equipment designed for our personal use as an important contributing factor toward safety. The abuse, misuse, or nonuse of such equipment, on the other hand, are contributing causes to many disabling injuries.

Wearing the proper clothing and personal protective equipment for each job you do can help protect you from serious injury and even death. Each year, more than 2 million workers suffer serious on-the-job injuries and illnesses. Most personal protective equipment (PPE) may seem bulky and uncomfortable, but you need to have it on before it's too late. So you must know which hazards you may encounter before you work.

It Depends on the Job

The particular type of equipment needed to provide the needed protection depends on the particular type of work being done. In areas where flying particles are likely to be found, goggles must be used to protect the eyes. But this won't provide enough eye protection for an electric welder; that job calls for a helmet equipped with dark glasses to protect the worker's eyes from the blinding light and the sparks from the electric arc.

Similarly the kind of protection safety shoes are supposed to provide determines what type of shoe is appropriate. In other words, it must be slip-proof, nonconductive, high-topped, steel-toed, etc. And the type of safety helmet to be worn depends on the type of hazard the wearer is likely to encounter. In some occupations "bump caps" may be adequate; in many they are not.

OSHA Says

The regulations established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration for head, face, eye, hand, arm, and foot protection give a very general overall description of when such protective gear is to be used. (Hearing protection devices and respirators of various kinds are covered by more extensive and specific rules.) They also describe the standards the pieces of equipment must meet.

Originally these OSHA rules said only that the required personal protective equipment must be provided (whether by employer or employee), maintained, and worn. It was pretty much a matter of our responsibility as employers to require the use of PPE and your responsibility to actually use it. This made a certain amount of sense because, after all, it's your eyes that can be injured if your safety glasses are hanging around your neck.

But then OSHA apparently decided that too many injuries were occurring as the result of failure to wear protective equipment. So their revised rules call for what they refer to as a hazard analysis-to make sure we systematically identify all the factors in our work that would call for requiring PPE. On top of that, it's become the employer's responsibility not just to state that the equipment must be worn but to see to it that it is worn.



No Exceptions, No Excuses

That's why supervisors are now getting "on the backs" of employees who aren't wearing the personal protective equipment they're supposed to, and why disciplinary action is forthcoming.

But it's not just a matter of compliance. It's because we really don't want you to be injured. That's not totally unselfish—we don't want you hurt, and we do want you on the job. That's why we don't make exceptions or accept excuses. If you don't need safety headgear on your own job, you must wear it if you go to an area where falling objects may be a hazard. If your gloves or goggles don't fit snugly or are uncomfortable, don't just leave them in your locker. Report it promptly so the situation can be corrected.

Remember: no excuses, no exceptions—and, we all hope, no injuries.

Head Hazards

If you work in an area where there's a possible danger of head injury from impact, falling or flying objects or electrical shock or bumps, then you must wear head protection. Hard hats are specifically designed to resist penetration and to absorb the shock of a blow. Ask your supervisor which type of hard hat you need to wear.

Respiratory Hazards

If the air in your workplace contains fine particles, sprays, mists or toxic gases, you should wear respiratory protection. Air-purifying respirators filter contaminants out of the air. Supplied-air respirators provide a source of air when there's not enough oxygen. Masks for fumes, dust and particulate can also protect your respiratory system. Talk with your supervisor about which type of respirator you should use.

Eye Hazards

If anything in your workplace can fly, splash or drift into your eyes, you need eye protection. Common causes of eye injury when eyes are unprotected include flying objects or particles; splashing liquids and metals; drifting gases, vapors, dusts, powders, fumes and mists; thermal and radiation hazards, such as heat, glare, ultraviolet and infra-red rays; lasers; and electrical hazards. Safety glasses, goggles and face shields are designed to protect against impact from objects, irritating substances, chemical and other splashes, extreme heat and many other hazards. Ask your supervisor which type of eye protection you need and when to wear it.

Hearing Hazards

If you have to shout to be heard on the job, you're working in noise levels that are high enough to damage your hearing over time, so you need to wear hearing protection. Hearing protection devices, such as earplugs and earmuffs, screen out loud, harmful noises while allowing you to hear what you need to hear. Talk with your supervisor about the correct hearing protection for you.

Foot Hazards

If you work in an area where it's possible that your toes, ankles or feet could be injured by sharp objects, falling objects, impact, slipping, tripping, electrical hazards, chemical spills or heat hazards, then you need to wear foot protection, such as steel-toed boots. Consult with your supervisor to find out which type of foot protection you should wear.



Hand Hazards

If your hands are exposed to possible injury from machinery, heat, cold, electricity, chemicals, toxic substances, materials such as metal, wood, concrete, mortar, paint, tools, etc., you need to wear hand protection. The proper hand protection, in the form of gloves, mitts, thimbles, finger cots, hand pads, barrier creams and arm cuffs can protect you from abrasions, cuts, lacerations, punctures, crushing, burns, heat and cold, dermatitis and other injuries. Ask your supervisor which type or types of hand protection you need.

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