

Occupational Health Group is a service offered to the business community of North Alabama by Huntsville Hospital and Decatur General Hospital Systems

RESPIRATOR CLEARANCE

by Joseph Rea, M.D., M.P.H.



Respirators can be used to protect individuals exposed to airborne hazards or relative oxygen deficiency in their workplace. Respirator clearance is the means by which an individual is medically evaluated and then matched safely to a personal respirator.

According to OSHA both routine users and occasional users (e.g., emergency personnel) of tight-fitting respirators require clearance. The basic components of respirator clearance are medical evaluation and respirator fit testing.

MEDICAL EVALUATION

A medical evaluation determines if an employee is physically able to wear a respirator. This does not always require a physical exam. An option is for the employee to submit the OSHA Respiratory Protection Standard questionnaire. Customized forms based on this standard may also be used. The questionnaire is confidential and is maintained in the employee's medical record. The questionnaire is reviewed by a physician or other licensed health care provider who will recommend a physical exam depending on the answers to questions that suggest potential problems with respirator use. The physical may include optional tests, like a pulmonary function test or a chest X-ray.

The employer also sends the examiner information about the respirator (type, weight, frequency of use) and working conditions (effort, temperature, humidity, protective clothing). Combining this information with exam results, the examiner sends a report to the employer describing any medical limitations the employee may have regarding respirator use or the need for further evaluation. The employee also receives a copy of this report.

There is no annual or periodic requirement for a medical evaluation. Repeat evaluations are needed, however, if there are later problems with using the respirator. Likewise, adverse changes in health or changes to a more demanding job or work environment could lead to further medical evaluation.

RESPIRATOR FIT TESTING

Next the employee brings a selected respirator, dons the apparatus, and prepares to pass a fit test. A fit test explores how well the facepiece forms the seal with the individual's face. This is determined by using either a qualitative or a quantitative method.

In the qualitative approach, an agent such as saccharine or smoke is delivered around the donned respirator. A successful test occurs when the individual cannot smell or taste the agent and the facepiece is presumed tight. If the individual can smell or taste the agent then the respirator is leaking and needs to be readjusted or changed. A quantitative method uses a sampling device which measures the amount of agent which might leak into the mask. Qualitative testing is easier to do but depends on the individual responding correctly. Quantitative fit testing is technically more difficult but is objective and is used when added reliability is needed such as in a highly hazardous exposure situation. This is defined as being in an atmosphere >10 times the hazard's permissible exposure limit.

Some employee features can be problematic. Missing dentures, facial scars, or jewelry can all interfere with proper seal. Glasses or goggles may also interfere (note: respirator manufacturers have kits available that will allow corrective lenses to be placed inside full respirator face pieces.) Beards or mustaches can interfere with a facepiece seal. Extra facial hair is not an issue for those types of respirators which do not need a tight seal (e.g.: hoods, helmets). Contact lenses are allowed basically because they do not come between the face and the face piece.

Fit testing is required by OSHA annually. Fit testing is also needed whenever there are changes in the employee's physical condition as this could affect respirator fit. Examples include facial injuries or excessive weight loss or gain, any of which could change the contour of the face and so affect fit.

There is no requirement to fit test for "escape-only" respirators, which are the kind given to quickly exit a hazardous environment in an emergency. Also, loose-fitting respirators do not require a fit test. Tight-fitting respirators, voluntarily worn, do not require a fit test.

VOLUNTARY RESPIRATOR USE

Some employees may simply want to use a respirator even if not at risk. This is a voluntary decision on their part and may be spurred by personal safety concerns or comfort issues. Employees must receive the basic advisory information found in Appendix D of the Respiratory Protection Standard. These individuals still must be medically able to use their respirator. Because of that they require medical evaluation. Fit testing is not required, however. Employees who use only dust masks undergo neither medical evaluation nor fit testing.

Forms Available on OHG Website

Occupational Health Group offers some of its forms online for the convenience of employers. These forms can be downloaded from our website at <http://www.ohgonline.org/forms.html>. Some of the forms included on the site are:

- ◆ Respiratory Clearance Form
- ◆ Treatment Authorization Form
- ◆ 1st Report of Injury Form



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Possible Outdoor Hazards for the Workplace

provided by Charlene Learner, Wellness Coordinator



Employers and workers cope with heat-related work hazards during the summer months. Some of those hazards include heat, direct sun exposure, and Lyme Disease (from ticks). The following is advice taken from the Center for Disease Control and OSHA to help employers and employees be aware of the potential

hazards that are a part of working in an outdoor environment in the summer:

SUN (1)

Sunlight contains ultraviolet (UV) radiation, which causes premature aging of the skin, wrinkles, cataracts and skin cancer. There are no safe UV rays or safe suntans. Be especially careful in the sun if you burn easily, spend a lot of time outdoors, or have any of the following physical features:

- Numerous freckles
- Lighter natural skin color
- Blonde, red, or light brown hair

Here's how to block those harmful rays:

- **Cover up.** Wear tightly woven clothing you can't see through
- **Use sunscreen.** A sun protector factor (SPF) of at least 15 blocks 93% of UV rays. Be sure to follow application directions on the bottle or tube.
- **Wear a hat.** A wide brim hat, not a baseball cap, works best because it protects the neck, ears, eyes, forehead, nose and scalp.
- **Wear UV-absorbent shades.** Sunglasses don't have to be expensive, but they should be able to block 99 to 100% of UVA and UVB radiation. Before you buy, read the product tag or label.
- **Limit exposure.** UV rays are most intense between 10 a.m. and 4p.m.

HEAT (2)

The combination of heat and humidity can be a serious health threat during the summer months. If you work at a

beach resort, on a farm, or in a kitchen, laundry or bakery, for example, you may be at risk for heat-related illness. So, take precautions. Here's how:

- Drink plenty of water before you get thirsty.
- Wear light, loose-fitting, breathable clothing - cotton is good.
- Take frequent short breaks in cool shade.
- Eat smaller meals before work activity.
- Avoid caffeine or large amounts of sugar
- Find out from your health-care provider if your medications and heat don't mix.
- Know your equipment such as respirators or work suits can increase heat stress.

LYME DISEASE (3)

This illness is caused by bites from infected ticks. Most but not all, victims will develop a "bull's-eye" rash. Other signs and symptoms may be non-specific and similar to flu symptoms such as, fever, lymph node swelling, neck stiffness, generalized fatigue, headaches, migrating joint aches or muscle aches. You are at increased risk if you are working outdoors involves construction, landscaping, forestry, brush clearing, land surveying, farming, railroads, oil fields, utility lines, or park and wildlife management.

Protect yourself with these precautions:

- Wear light colored clothing to see ticks more easily.
- Wear long sleeves; tuck pants into socks or boots.
- Wear high boots or closed shoes that cover your feet completely.
- Wear a hat
- Use tick repellents, but not on your face.
- Shower after work. Wash and dry your clothes at high temperature.
- Examine your body for ticks after work. Remove any attached ticks with fine-tipped tweezers. Do not use petroleum jelly, a hot match, or nail polish to remove a tick.

(1) http://www.cdc.gov/cancer/skin/basic_info/

(2) <http://wonder.cdc.gov/wonder/prevguid/p0000449/p0000449.asp>

(3) http://www.osha.gov/OshDoc/data_LymeFacts/lymefac.pdf

Employee Spotlight: Sandi Bowen, Practice Adminstrator



Sandi is the Practice Administrator at the Decatur clinic. She joined OHG in 1998, with 18 years management experience in healthcare settings. Since joining OHG she has become a Certified Occupational Hearing Conservationist and received certifications in CPR, Breath Alcohol Screening, Drug Screening, and

Spirometry. Sandi received her management degree from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. She is a member of the Society of Human Resources Managers.

Flu News

Summer is Here... but Flu Season is just around the corner.

Watch for upcoming information about scheduling your flu shots for the 2008-2009 season.

OHG Directory

- Administration.....(256) 922-6675
- Marketing and Business Development.....(256) 922-6677
- Billing Department.....(256) 922-6673
- OHG - Huntsville.....(256) 265-7000
- OHG - Madison.....(256) 774-7300
- OHG - Decatur.....(256) 353-4325
- Wellness Services.....(256) 922-6699

Holiday Schedule

All OHG clinics will be closed in observance of the following holidays:

- July 4th** Friday, July 4th
- Labor Day** Monday, September 1st

www.OHGonline.org



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