RESPIRATORS

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

People involved in agriculture work around substances that can cause breathing problems. Choosing and using the right respirator can be the key to protecting your lungs.

National Farm Medicine Center

WHAT DOES A RESPIRATOR DO?

A respirator filters out substances or blocks gases or vapors that can cause harm to the lungs.

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF RESPIRATORS?

Disposable dust respirators filter particles and some mists and are made of a shaped piece of material held to the head by two straps.

Chemical cartridge respirators protect against gases and vapors. The replaceable cartridges contain a substance that adsorbs specific gases and vapors. Many also come with replaceable pre-filters.

Powered air-purifying respirators move filtered air over the face inside a face piece. A rechargeable battery pack attaches to the belt of the wearer. This kind of respirator is especially good for individuals with heart and lung conditions who might not be able to use other respirators, or for individuals with beards or sideburns who cannot get a good fit with other respirators.

SCBA or self contained breathing apparatus units supply safe air and shield you completely from toxic gases.

HOW DO I KNOW WHAT KIND OF RESPIRATOR TO BUY?

A coding system is used by manufacturers to help users choose the right type of respirator for their work. In July of 1998, respirators coded with N, R, and P codes became available. These certification categories apply to nonpowered, particulate filter respirators. The designation "N" means the respirator is not resistant to oil; "R" means it is resistant to oil; and "P" means the unit is oil proof. All three classes of filters are available in efficiency levels of 99.97%, 99%, and 95%. For example, a respirator marked N95 would be at least 95% efficient and is not resistant to oil.

WHAT DO I LOOK FOR WHEN SHOPPING FOR A RESPIRATOR?

Look for two things: NIOSH approval indicated by N, R, or P coding, and a label that lists the substances from which the respirator will protect you. Work environments with high levels of gases require SCBA. A snug fit is essential to your protection. Be sure to follow the manufacturer's directions for a proper fit every time you wear the respirator. If you have a heart condition, latex allergy, facial skin rash, asthma, emphysema, or other chronic lung condition, you should check with your physician before using a respirator.

WHERE CAN I PURCHASE RESPIRATORS?

Some general farm supply stores, cooperatives and pharmacies carry respirators. Mail order is also an economical and convenient way to purchase a variety of types.

WHAT DOES A RESPIRATOR COST?

Depending upon the supplier and the quantity purchased, NIOSH-approved dust respirators can be purchased for as little as 75 cents each.

CAN I REUSE A RESPIRATOR?

Yes, in most cases respirators can be reused. The length of use for each disposable respirator depends upon your breathing rate and the amount of exposure to a contaminant. A respirator should be changed when it appears soiled, or when you notice it becomes difficult to breathe through. Cartridge respirators also require replacement of pre filters and cartridges when they become difficult to breathe through or an odor is noticed. Never wash or blow out respirators, filters, or cartridges because this destroys their filtering properties. Instead, replace them with a new unit.

HOW SHOULD I STORE MY RESPIRATOR?

When not in use, store your respirator in a handy place near your work area and in a dry container or closed plastic bag. This protects it from contaminants and extends its life. Don't store your respirator in direct sunlight, since it can cause the respirator and straps to deteriorate.

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For more information, call us at 1-800-662-6900 or visit our web site at http://www.marshfieldclinic.org/nfmc

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