

Protective Clothing and Equipment

Your Personal Line of Defense

Each year some 2 million workers suffer disabling injuries at work. Add to these injuries the gradual loss of hearing, eyesight and respiratory health experienced by other workers and you have an excellent case for using PPE—personal protective equipment—on the job.

Know Your Hazards

Workers are often unaware of the dangers in their work environments. Accidents happen fast, and many workers simply do not notice the effects of cumulative hazards until it's too late to do anything about them. Here are the facts about specific hazards in the workplace and what you can do to protect yourself.

Unsafe Air

If the air in your workplace contains fine particles, sprays, mists or toxic gases, you should be wearing a respirator. Air-purifying respirators filter contaminants out of the air, while supplied-air respirators provide a source of air when the air around you does not contain enough oxygen. Contaminated air may not seem to be a problem; many contaminants have no apparent effect on your breathing or health until your lungs are permanently damaged. Use your respirator daily to avoid long-term lung problems.

Eye Hazards

Do you need eye protection on the job? If anything in your workplace can fly, splash or drift into your eyes, the answer is "Yes!" Safety glasses, goggles and faceshields are designed to protect against impact from large objects, irritating fine dust, chemical splashes (always unexpected!) extreme heat and many other hazards. If you're not sure why your company requires eye pro-



tection, ask your supervisor. Chances are your company has learned about eye hazards from situations you might never have considered.

Noise

Often workers are not aware of how much noise they are experiencing. If you have to shout to be heard on the job, you are working in noise levels over 85 decibels, enough to damage your hearing over time. Naturally ear protection is an inconvenience—you may feel you can't hear others while wearing it, but in fact most hearing protection screens out loud noises while it allows you to hear what you need to hear. OSHA-approved earplugs, earmuffs, or a combination of the two can safely and comfortably reduce ear damage (and, incidentally, lower your stress) on the job.

"Bodyguards" for Extreme Hazards

If you're one of the few workers who must work in extremely hazardous conditions, you know that the goal of

your PPE is to seal you off completely from the environment you are in. You will wear a fully enclosed chemical- and possibly heat-resistant suit with built-in boots, gloves and self-contained breathing apparatus. This type of PPE takes training to wear properly and requires an assistant to help you put it on—and get it off—without contaminating yourself. Some types of PPE for hazardous environments are disposable, eliminating the tricky problem of decontaminating them safely.

Other Physical Hazards

Most of the options available to protect you from physical hazards—steel-toed boots, chemical-resistant gloves, hard hats, eye and face protectors, protective coveralls—seem bulky and uncomfortable until that unexpected moment when you really need them. By then it's too late to put them on. Think about it. Your company isn't likely to waste good money buying, and training you to use, protective equipment that you don't need. They do it because it's to their benefit to have you on the job rather than in a hospital. The good news is that designers are making lighter, stronger, more comfortable (and, in some cases, more fashionable!) PPE than ever before. ☑

Checklist for Users

- Check for leaks signs of wear before each use.
- Wear PPE properly. Ask your supervisor if you're not sure.
- Use the right size.
- Keep equipment clean (decontaminate if necessary).
- Follow strict guidelines for removing contaminated PPE.
- Report any health problems while using PPE.