

Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE): Facial Hair and Face Masks

Respiratory protective equipment (RPE) is issued as a means of control to prevent the inhalation of hazardous substances at work. When worn and used correctly, RPE can prevent serious lung conditions caused by inhaling dust and other contaminants.



What are tight-fitting masks?

Many common types of RPE comprise a tight-fitting mask where performance relies on achieving a good seal between the mask and the wearer's face. These include:

Disposable masks

(P1, P2 and P3 filtering facepieces)



Re-usable half masks



Full face masks

(including those used with breathing apparatus)



The effect of facial hair on protection

In order to ensure that a specific make, model and size of mask is able to achieve a good fit to an individual wearer, a fit test should be conducted by a competent person and the wearer must have no facial hair in the region of the face seal. Facial hair can prevent the mask from forming a good seal, by creating gaps around the edges of the mask. This allows contaminants into the mask, to be breathed in by the wearer.

Where's the evidence?

A recent study by the Health and Safety Executive shows that as facial hair grows, the protection offered by a tight-fitting mask reduces. The reduction in protection is very unpredictable and is different for individual wearers and masks. Protection can be significantly reduced where stubble is present, beginning within 24 hours from shaving, and generally worsening as facial hair grows. It is important therefore that wearers should be clean-shaven, not only for a fit test but whenever they wear a tight-fitting mask at work.



What constitutes facial hair?

Facial hair that interferes with the sealing surface of the mask can include:

- stubble
- a beard
- a moustache
- sideburns

Facial hair which is not in the region of the face seal may be acceptable. However, it is important that the facial hair is kept appropriately trimmed so as to not interfere with the seal of the mask. This will require monitoring and supervision.

Your options

Firstly, it is important to educate your workforce about the importance of correctly using and wearing RPE.

- Provide suitable training for RPE wearers such as a short toolbox talk on how to use and correctly fit their masks, and on the importance of being clean-shaven. This applies to all types of RPE, especially disposable filtering facepieces as these types are widely used.
- Use an accredited fit tester. If fit testing is conducted by a competent person, then the 'clean-shaven' message will be delivered at the time of fit testing, along with advice about being clean-shaven whenever tight-fitting RPE is used at work.

Introduce a clean-shaven policy

- Introduce a clean shaven requirement into your health and safety policy. This approach requires a good management system to be in place, requires constant monitoring and supervision, and actions taken when breaches with the policy occur. It can prove challenging to enforce, but establishes a level playing field for all staff.
- The right to have facial hair is often cited as a reason for not being clean-shaven at work. However, this needs to be balanced against the requirement under the occupational health and safety legislation. This requires employees to follow the training they have received, take care of their own health and safety and co-operate with their employer on health and safety.
- A clean shaven policy may not be possible to enforce in certain circumstances such as where beards are worn for religious reasons, or someone has a genuine skin complaint that makes it impractical to shave every day. In these instances you'll be required to supply alternative RPE that does not rely on a tight seal.

Supply alternative RPE that does not rely on a tight seal to provide protection

Battery powered or compressed air supplied RPE with loose-fitting facepieces may be suitable alternatives. Whilst these types of RPE require a close fit to the wearer's face, they don't require a tight-fit like masks do.

Examples include:

Hoods



Helmets



Visors



Remove the need to wear RPE

Although this should have already been considered by working through the hierarchy of control, it may be worth reviewing whether the need for RPE can be engineered out.