



TEAMSTERS Safety & Health FACTS

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Swine Flu Facemask and Respirator Use

How does the pandemic flu virus spread in the workplace?

Workers can get the pandemic flu virus by breathing in small particles (very small pieces of matter) that contain the virus. These particles are spread through the air when a person who has the virus coughs, sneezes, or talks. Workers can breathe these particles into their lungs and become infected with the virus.

What are “particulate respirators”?

Workers can wear respirators to make sure they do not breathe in these particles and become infected with the virus. The type of respirator workers need to wear is called a *particulate respirator*. Surgical masks (like the ones that doctors wear to prevent their saliva from getting on the patient) do not protect workers. **Employers must follow all of the rules in OSHA’s Respiratory Protection Standard 1910.134 before giving workers a respirator.**

How do particulate respirators work?

A particulate respirator protects workers by filtering out particles that are in the air. These particles may contain the flu virus. Respirators must seal tightly around the nose, mouth and face in order for them to work properly. This way, when a worker breathes, the air is pulled through the filters before it goes into the worker’s lungs.

Can any respirator be used in the workplace?

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) is a federal government agency. NIOSH is responsible for testing and certifying all respirators used in workplaces in the United States. Under OSHA’s respirator standard, only NIOSH certified respirators can be worn by workers.

Surgical masks are not respirators. A surgical mask does not give workers any protection from breathing in particles. These masks do not have a tight seal around the nose, mouth and face. Particles that contain the flu virus can easily get through the gaps between the mask and face and enter the lungs. Also, the material used in surgical masks is not made to filter small particles. Surgical masks are not certified by NIOSH as respirators. OSHA does not allow them to be used in the workplace to protect workers from breathing in chemicals or particles. **Surgical masks must never be used to prevent workers from breathing in swine flu virus particles!**

Are there different types of particulate respirators?

Three types of particulate respirators will work to protect workers from breathing in the flu virus:

- **Disposable filtering facepieces:** These respirators can be used once and then they must be thrown away.
- **Reusable elastomeric respirators:** These respirators can be used again after cleaning, disinfecting and replacing the used filters.
- **Powered air purifying respirators (PAPRs).** These respirators run off of a battery that pulls the contaminated air through the filter. They can be used again after cleaning, disinfecting and replacing used filters.

Each of these particulate filtering respirators is rated by their ability to filter out small particles: 95%, 99%, and 100%.

Does OSHA have any guidelines for choosing a particulate respirator to protect workers from the flu virus?

- ❖ **OSHA** has the following recommendations for choosing a particulate respirator:
- ❖ Choose N95 or higher-rated filter respirators for “high-risk” workers* like health care workers and workers who respond to emergencies.
- ❖ Wear a powered air purifying respirator (PAPR) if health care workers have to insert an instrument into the patient’s airway (for example, to do a bronchoscopy or intubation).
- ❖ If workers have a lot of contact with people on the job (like schools, crowded workplaces, and busy stores) use of a respirator is recommended. This is especially important if there is close contact with people who might have swine flu.
- ❖ The Teamsters recommend using a more protective particulate respirator for high risk workers (like health care workers and emergency responders). The recommended respirator is a P100 respirator with an elastomeric (rubber-like) facepiece seal or a PAPR with filters that have a high rating for filtering out small particles.