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SAFETY ALERT

No. 21-01

VOLUNTARY USE OF N95
RESPIRATORS BY EMPLOYEES

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This Safety Alert provides information on the voluntary use of N95 respirators by employees.



What is an N95 respirator (N95)? An N95 is a disposable filtering respirator with two straps. These respirators filter out at least 95% of very small (0.3 micron) particles. When worn properly, the mask makes a tight seal with the user's face to protect against hazardous airborne particles.

Why use an N95? According to the California Occupational Health & Safety Administration's (Cal/OSHA) [COVID-19 Prevention Emergency Temporary Standards](#), there are two main scenarios for employee voluntary use of this type of respirator. 1). An unvaccinated employee who works with others indoors or in a vehicle and who requests an N95 must be provided with one.

2). When there is a major outbreak at a workplace, any employees in the exposed group shall be provided with an N95 if requested. In both instances, N95s shall be provided without fear of retaliation and at no cost to employees. There is no need to confirm vaccination status of employees when providing an N95.

An employee has requested an N95. What now? Each school has been provided a supply of N95s expressly for this purpose. Additional supplies can be ordered through the Stores Warehouse. Schools and offices should estimate how many they may need and order accordingly. To avoid stockpiling, re-orders will be monitored and limited.

Each employee who receives a N95 for COVID-19 must also be provided:

- A copy of this Safety Alert with Attachment #1, *"Information for Employees Using Respirators When Not Required Under the Standard"*
- The N95 manufacturer's directions for use, and
- Access to this video that shows how to properly put on and take off a N95 mask and how to perform a seal check: shorturl.at/adA34.

Please ensure that requesting employees are aware that facial hair interferes with the N95's ability to obtain a seal on the face. Medical personnel using N95s for COVID-19-related work fall under a different set of requirements. This Safety Alert does not pertain to mandatory use of N95s by medical personnel and they should continue to request and receive their N95s through

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their established departmental process.

What about wildfires? Cal/OSHA also has requirements for the use of N95s due to wildfire smoke in their regulation on [Protection from Wildfire Smoke](#). For employees working outdoors when the Air Quality Index for fine particles (PM2.5) is forecasted to be or currently is 151 or greater, work activities shall be moved inside enclosed buildings with working HVAC. If this is not feasible, the work may be relocated to other areas, the work intensity may be reduced, or additional rest periods may be provided. For workers remaining outdoors, N95 respirators shall be provided for voluntary use when requested.

Each employee who receives an N95 for wildfire smoke must also be provided:

- A copy of this Safety Alert with Attachment #2, *“Protection from Wildfire Smoke Information to be Provided to Employees”*
- The N95 manufacturer’s directions for use, and
- Access to this video that shows how to properly put on and take off a N95 mask and how to perform a seal check: shorturl.at/adA34.

What are the limitations of N95s? N95s work great when used properly but are not recommended under all conditions. Please note the following limitations.

- N95 respirator masks are designed for professional use by trained adults
- N95 masks are not intended for children and are not recommended for children by air quality districts or public health agencies.
- N95 masks require a complete seal to be effective. If these masks are not fitted correctly, they will provide little or no protection.
- N95s can exacerbate breathing difficulty for sensitive breathers or potentially cause deeper breathing, which draws particulates deeper into the lungs if they are not fitted correctly.
- Masks must be kept clean and replaced frequently to be effective. If an N95 mask is used, please refer to the mask manufacturer’s recommendations on cleaning and replacement intervals.
- N95 masks with exhalation valves are not appropriate when worn to prevent COVID-19 exposure.
- It is important to note that N95 masks only filter particulate matter, not gases and vapors. Accordingly, the smell of smoke may still be detected while wearing an N95 mask and does not mean that the mask is not working.



For additional information on Cal/OSHA’s Protection from Wildfire Smoke Safety Order, including details on the Air Quality Index, please visit their website at https://www.dir.ca.gov/title8/5141_1.html.

If you have any questions, please contact us at OEHSQuestions@lausd.net, (213) 241-3199 or visit our website at <https://achieve.lausd.net/oehs>.



Appendix D to Section 5144: (Mandatory) Information for Employees Using Respirators When Not Required Under the Standard

Respirators are an effective method of protection against designated hazards when properly selected and worn. Respirator use is encouraged even when exposures are below the exposure limit, to provide an additional level of comfort and protection for workers. However, if a respirator is used improperly or not kept clean, the respirator itself can become a hazard to the worker. Sometimes, workers may wear respirators to avoid exposures to hazards, even if the amount of hazardous substance does not exceed the limits set by OSHA standards. If your employer provides respirators for your voluntary use, or if you provide your own respirator, you need to take certain precautions to be sure that the respirator itself does not present a hazard.

You should do the following:

1. Read and heed all instructions provided by the manufacturer on use, maintenance, cleaning and care, and warnings regarding the respirators limitations.
2. Choose respirators certified for use to protect against the contaminant of concern. NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, certifies respirators. A label or statement of certification should appear on the respirator or respirator packaging. It will tell you what the respirator is designed for and how much it will protect you.
3. Do not wear your respirator into atmospheres containing contaminants for which your respirator is not designated to protect against. For example, a respirator designed to filter dust particles will not protect you against gases, vapors or very small solid particles of fumes or smoke.
4. Keep track of your respirator so that you do not mistakenly use someone else's respirator.

Additional information may be found in Cal/OSHA's *Respiratory Protection in the Workplace – A Guide for Employers* which may be accessed at:

https://www.dir.ca.gov/DOSH/DOSH_Publications/respiratory-protection-employer-guide.pdf



Appendix B to Section 5141.1. Protection from Wildfire Smoke Information to Be Provided to Employees (Mandatory)

(a) The health effects of wildfire smoke.

Although there are many hazardous chemicals in wildfire smoke, the main harmful pollutant for people who are not very close to the fire is “particulate matter,” the tiny particles suspended in the air.

Particulate matter can irritate the lungs and cause persistent coughing, phlegm, wheezing, or difficulty breathing. Particulate matter can also cause more serious problems, such as reduced lung function, bronchitis, worsening of asthma, heart failure, and early death.

People over 65 and people who already have heart and lung problems are the most likely to suffer from serious health effects.

The smallest -and usually the most harmful -particulate matter is called PM2.5 because it has a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or smaller.

(b) The right to obtain medical treatment without fear of reprisal.

Employers shall allow employees who show signs of injury or illness due to wildfire smoke exposure to seek medical treatment, and may not punish affected employees for seeking such treatment. Employers shall also have effective provisions made in advance for prompt medical treatment of employees in the event of serious injury or illness caused by wildfire smoke exposure.

(c) How employees can obtain the current Air Quality Index (AQI) for PM2.5.

Various government agencies monitor the air at locations throughout California and report the current AQI for those places. The AQI is a measurement of how polluted the air is. An AQI over 100 is unhealthy for sensitive people and an AQI over 150 is unhealthy for everyone.

Although there are AQIs for several pollutants, Title 8, section 5141.1 only uses the AQI for PM2.5.

The easiest way to find the current and forecasted AQI for PM2.5 is to go to AirNow.gov and enter the zip code, town, or city where you will be working. The current AQI is also available at fire.AirNow.gov, an interactive map which also provides information about some fires and smoke plumes. You can also visit the website of your local air district. Employees who do not have access to the internet can contact their employer for the current AQI. The EPA website enviroflash.info can transmit daily and forecasted AQIs by text or email for particular cities or zip codes.

(d) The requirements of Title 8, section 5141.1.

If employees may be exposed to wildfire smoke, then the employer is required to find out the current AQI applicable to the worksite. If the current AQI for PM2.5 is 151 or more, the employer is required to:

- (1) Check the current AQI at the start of each shift and periodically thereafter.
- (2) Provide training to employees.
- (3) Lower employee exposures.
- (4) Provide respirators and encourage their use.

(e) The employer's two-way communication system.

Employers shall alert employees when the air quality is harmful and what protective measures are available to employees.

Employers shall encourage employees to inform their employers if they notice the air quality is getting worse, or if they are suffering from any symptoms due to the air quality, without fear of reprisal.

The employer's communication system is: _____

(f) The employer's methods to protect employees from wildfire smoke.

Employers shall take action to protect employees from PM2.5 when the current AQI for PM2.5 is 151 or greater. Examples of protective methods include:

- (1) Locating work in enclosed structures or vehicles where the air is filtered.
- (2) Changing procedures such as moving workers to a place with a lower current AQI for PM2.5.

Attachment #2 for Wildfire Smoke

- (3) Reducing work time in areas with unfiltered air.
- (4) Increasing rest time and frequency, and providing a rest area with filtered air.
- (5) Reducing the physical intensity of the work to help lower the breathing and heart rates.

The employer's control system at this worksite is: _____

(g) The importance, limitations, and benefits of using a respirator when exposed to wildfire smoke.

Respirators can be an effective way to protect employee health by reducing exposure to wildfire smoke, when they are properly selected and worn. Respirator use can be beneficial even when the AQI for PM2.5 is less than 151, to provide additional protection.

When the current AQI for PM2.5 is 151 or greater, employers shall provide their workers with proper respirators for voluntary use. If the current AQI is greater than 500, respirator use is required, except in emergencies.

A respirator should be used properly and kept clean.

The following precautions shall be taken:

- (1) Employers shall select respirators certified for protection against the specific air contaminants at the workplace. Respirators must be certified by NIOSH, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. A label or statement of certification should appear on the respirator or respirator packaging. It will list what the respirator is designed for (particulates, for example).

Surgical masks or items worn over the nose and mouth such as scarves, T-shirts, and bandannas will not provide protection against wildfire smoke. An N95 filtering facepiece respirator, shown in the image below, is the minimum level of protection for wildfire smoke.

- (2) Read and understand the manufacturer's instructions on the respirator's use, care, and replacement, along with any warnings regarding the respirator's limitations. If the respirator is reusable, read and understand the instructions for cleaning and maintenance. The manufacturer's instructions must be followed except for medical evaluations, fit testing, and shaving of facial hair, which are recommended but not required for voluntary use of filtering facepiece respirators.
- (3) Do not wear respirators in areas where the air contains contaminants for which the respirator is not designed. A respirator designed to filter particles will not protect employees against gases or vapors, and it will not supply oxygen.
- (4) Employees should keep track of their respirator so that they do not mistakenly use someone else's respirator.
- (5) Employees who have a heart or lung problem should ask their health care provider before using a respirator.

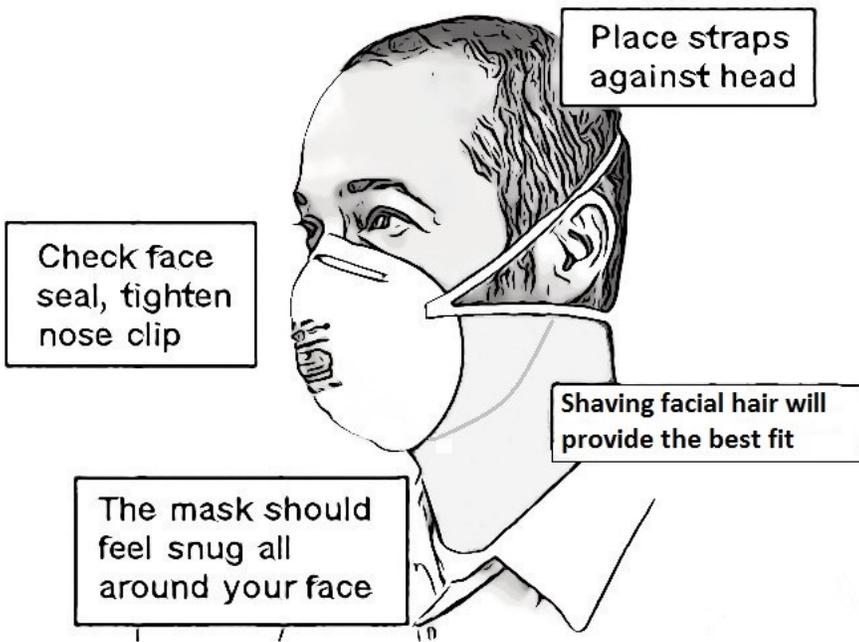
(h) How to properly put on and use the respirators provided by the employer.

To get the most protection from a respirator, there must be a tight seal around the face. A respirator will provide much less protection if facial hair interferes with the seal. Loose-fitting powered air purifying respirators may be worn by people with facial hair since they do not have seals that are affected by facial hair.

The proper way to put on a respirator depends on the type and model of the respirator.

For those who use an N95 or other filtering facepiece respirator mask that is made of filter material:

- (1) Place the mask over the nose and under the chin, with one strap placed below the ears and one strap above.
- (2) Pinch the metal part (if there is one) of the respirator over the top of the nose so it fits securely.



For a respirator that relies on a tight seal to the face, check how well it seals to the face by following the manufacturer's instructions for user seal checks. Adjust the respirator if air leaks between the seal and the face. The more air leaks under the seal, the less protection the user receives.

Respirator filters should be replaced if they get damaged, deformed, dirty, or difficult to breathe through. Filtering facepiece respirators are disposable respirators that cannot be cleaned or disinfected. A best practice is to replace filtering facepiece respirators at the beginning of each shift.

If you have symptoms such as difficulty breathing, dizziness, or nausea, get medical help immediately.

Note: Authority cited: Section 142.3, Labor Code. Reference: Sections 142.3 and 144.6, Labor Code.