

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many employers have had to rapidly implement unfamiliar practices and procedures in response to a variety of new concerns and challenging situations. The use of face masks or respirators in the workplace has been a constant source of interest and confusion.

Before considering the use of personal protective equipment employers must first implement, where feasible, engineering, work practice and administrative controls as the means to prevent or reduce exposures, and only look at personal protective equipment as a last line of defense when exposures cannot be eliminated or substantially reduced in frequency and duration by using other methods.



Evaluating Respiratory Hazards and Implementing Hazard Controls

Employers must identify and evaluate respiratory hazards in the workplace. When exposures cannot be eliminated or substantially reduced by other methods employers must select respirators appropriate to the hazard. OSHA's [Guidance on Preparing Workplaces for COVID-19](#) guides employers on classifying employee exposure risk and implementing appropriate controls. Additional industry-specific guidance on the selection of personal protective equipment may also be available through the Illinois Department of Public Health and/or the U.S. Centers for Disease Control. NOTE: Varying levels of respiratory protection within one facility may be appropriate based on different work activities.

When an OSHA Compliant Respiratory Protection Program is Required

There is a substantial difference between face masks and respirators. The type of protection and whether use of it is mandatory or voluntary determines when a respiratory protection program is required. This [video](#) explains the difference between face masks and respirators. This [infographic](#) provides additional information and guidance on when a respiratory protection program is required. NOTE: Mandatory or voluntary use of cloth/paper masks and/or surgical masks do not require a respiratory protection program, however, they also are not classified to protect against inhaling small airborne particles.

Compliance During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Even in these challenging times, employers are required to demonstrate a good-faith effort with compliance to ensure the safety of their employees. Resources are available to employers that need assistance with implementing a respiratory protection program. This [Hospital Respiratory Protection Program Toolkit](#) from OSHA and the CDC is a just-in-time resource with a focus on aerosol transmissible diseases like COVID-19. Additionally, these are direct links to a [respirator medical evaluation questionnaire](#), [training videos](#) and [sample written program](#) that employers can quickly edit and adopt as their own.

Illinois OSHA is also offering compliance assistance to eligible employers. This assistance will be prioritized for employers operating in higher risk environments. To request assistance please call 800-972-4216 or send an email to dol.consultation@illinois.gov.



In compliance with the Stevens Amendment, Illinois OSHA is partially funded by two federal grants.

The 23(g) State Plan is funded by a federal grant which constitutes fifty percent of the overall budget. Fifty percent is financed by State funds. The 21(d) On-Site Consultation Cooperative Agreement is funded by a federal grant which constitutes ninety percent of the overall budget. Ten percent is financed by State funds.