

TOOLBOX TALK #22

RESPIRATOR FIT TESTS AND FACIAL HAIR

Question: *If I can get a worker with facial hair to pass a quantitative fit test using a PortaCount, can I then allow that worker to wear a full facepiece without him needing to shave?*

Answer: *The short answer? Absolutely not!*

This question comes up quite a bit, especially now that it's popular and fashionable for men to have facial hair. A PortaCount is a machine that measures air pressure inside the mask. If you have a worker with a beard, or even stubble, and he manages to tighten down his respirator to pass a PortaCount test once, it doesn't matter because the NIOSH requirement states that you may NOT have facial hair that would interfere with the seal of the facepiece.



Although a worker might pass the PortaCount on a particular day, facial hair still represents an unacceptable risk of breaking the mask's face seal. Really, the worker needs to be clean-shaven. The exceptions might be a small "soul patch" underneath the lip or a mustache so small that the seal of the mask never touches it. Two methods are used for fit testing – qualitative and quantitative. Qualitative is less expensive and easy to administer, but the Assigned Protection Factor (APF) for the mask is rated at a lower level. Details on qualitative fit testing can be found in the OSHA standards on the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website. Some work environments have known health risks because of exposure to contaminants. In these instances, employers may use a more stringent fit test method and quantitatively fit test workers with a PortaCount.

Annual fit testing (per OSHA 1910.134) with a PortaCount machine usually takes 20 minutes per worker. The worker dons the respirator that has a probe and tube that connects with the PortaCount. The worker completes a series of exercises – looking side to side, bending over, grimacing, etc. – to test if he or she can break the seal. If the seal remains intact, the worker has successfully fit tested with that style mask in that particular size. Workers cannot substitute the mask for a different size or style without additional fit testing. Immediate fit testing would be required for employee who have significant changes to their facial shape that might affect the fit of their respirator. This includes weight fluctuations of 10 pounds or more, new dentures, facial scars or piercings. The worker would have to be fit tested again.

In all instances, however, facial hair never is allowed. If a worker refuses to shave, he cannot work in the contaminated area using a tight-fitting facepiece. The supervisor may have the worker reassigned to another area not requiring respiratory protection. Or, in cases where employees' skills are valuable, employers may allow workers to keep their beards if they change to a hood. However, a hood can't take cartridges or filters – it requires a positive pressure solution (powered air-purifying or supplied air). Both of these options are more expensive and more complicated to use and maintain.

Respiratory protection is serious business. For this reason, facial hair with a full facepiece – regardless of fit test results – remains an absolute "NO".