

RISK SIMPLIFIED

RESOURCES:

[§5144.Respiratory Protection Appendix D to Section 5144](#)

QUESTIONS:

[E-mail PRISM Risk Control Department](#)

or call
916.850.7300

Voluntary Use of Filtering Facepiece Respirators (a.k.a. N95 respirators)

by John Nichols

Filtering facepiece respirators (also called dust masks) can be utilized to improve employee comfort on a voluntary basis. Cal/OSHA defines filtering facepiece as a “negative pressure particulate respirator with a filter as an integral part of the facepiece or with the entire facepiece composed of the filtering medium.” Filtering facepieces are distinguished from ordinary dust masks by the double straps and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approval rating (e.g. N95), and must be used in accordance with manufacturer recommendations. Although employer approval is necessary, voluntary respirator use is an employee choice when no hazard exists that requires use of a respirator and respirator use does not produce an additional hazard.

Examples of voluntary respirator use include:

- An employee with seasonal allergies wearing a filtering facepiece for comfort while working outdoors.
- An employee wearing a filtering facepiece during a wildfire smoke event when particulate matter concentrations are below the PEL.
- An employee wearing a filtering facepiece while dusting or sweeping.



Cal-OSHA Requirements

When the use of filtering facepieces is voluntary, Cal/OSHA has three requirements. The employer must:

- Ensure filtering facepieces are not dirty or contaminated.
- Ensure respirator use does not interfere with employee's ability to work safely.
- Provide employees with the information contained in Appendix D of the Respiratory Protection standard, which is linked in the resources list above.

Exception to Voluntary Filtering Facepiece Use Rule (Section 5144)

Employers are not required to include in a written respiratory protection program those employees whose only use of respirators involves the voluntary use of filtering facepieces (dust masks).

Best Practices

While not required for voluntary use of filtering facepiece respirators, it is recommended employers use the following best practices:

- Work with employees to ensure proper respirator fit.
- To help employees obtain best fit, offer respirators from multiple manufacturers in several sizes.
- Train employees on how to perform a seal check and encourage employees to perform the check each time a respirator is donned or repositioned.
- Prior to use or fit testing, have a healthcare professional conduct a medical evaluation to determine if an employee is medically fit to wear a respirator.



Limitations: Filtering Facepiece Respirators

- Cannot be worn in an atmosphere containing less than 19.5% Oxygen.
- Not intended for protection from organic vapors, gases and asbestos.
- Cannot be used in concentrations of contaminants that are Immediately Dangerous to Life and Health.
- Voluntary respirator use is not intended for Cal-OSHA compliance when workplace conditions exceed Permissible Exposure Limits (PEL).
- Not to be used with facial hair or other conditions that prevent a good seal between the face and respirator.
- Filtering facepiece respirators are single-use (no to exceed one shift), disposable respirators that are normally discarded after each use.

NIOSH Ratings: Filtering Facepiece Respirator

While the N95 rated filtering facepiece is perhaps the most well-known, there are other filtering facepiece ratings that are acceptable for voluntary use without creating additional program requirements. These ratings are based upon the respirator's filtration efficiency and suitability for use around oil-based aerosols.

Filter Resistance to Oil	Particulate Filtration: 95 = 95% efficient	Particulate Filtration: 99 = 99% efficient	Particulate Filtration: 100 = 99.97% efficient
"N" = not resistant to oil	N95 filtering face-piece respirator	N99 filtering face-piece respirator	N100 filtering face-piece respirator
"R" = somewhat resistant to oil	R95 filtering face-piece respirator	R99 filtering face-piece respirator	R100 filtering face-piece respirator
"P" = oil proof	P95 filtering face-piece respirator	P99 filtering face-piece respirator	P100 filtering face-piece respirator

Sources of Filtering Facepiece Respirators

Cal-OSHA maintains a list of vendors who report an available supply of filtering facepiece respirators (<https://www.dir.ca.gov/dosh/wildfire/List-of-N95-Vendors.pdf>).

For additional assistance, [please contact PRISM's Risk Control Department.](#)