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Implement, Maintain Respiratory Protection Program

THE successful implementation of a respiratory protection program is primarily dependent upon the employers' belief in the need for the program and the employees' acceptance of the program. This requires that both employer and employee thoroughly understand the plant processes and the possible hazards (both routine and non-routine or emergency) arising from these processes.

Obviously, control of respiratory hazards should start at the process in the form of engineering controls. In fact, the Occupational Safety and Health Act states that respiratory protection shall only be used when effective engineering controls are not feasible (with no consideration toward costs), or while engineering controls are being instituted.

When respirators are required to protect the health of the employees, a full and complete respiratory protection program is imperative to the successful attainment of this objective. Naturally, the elements of a complete and successful respiratory protection program will differ from plant to plant. However, we can list some of the minimum requirements of an effective program.

1. A written set of standard operating procedures governing the selection and use of respirators should be established.

2. Respirators should be selected on the basis of the hazards to which the worker is exposed.

3. The respirator user should be instructed and trained in the proper use of respirators and their limitations.

4. Each respirator wearer should be fit-tested and subsequently provided with a respirator that fits properly.

5. Where practicable, the respirators should be assigned to individual workers for their exclusive use.

6. Respirators should be regularly cleaned and disinfected. Respirators used by more than one worker should be thoroughly cleaned and disinfected after each use.

7. Respirators used routinely should be inspected during cleaning. Worn or deteriorated parts should be replaced. Respirators for emergency use should be thoroughly inspected at least once a month and after each use.

8. Respirators should be stored in a convenient, clean, and sanitary location.

9. Appropriate surveillance of work area conditions and degree of employee exposure or stress should be maintained.

10. A regular inspection and evaluation procedure should be implemented to determine the continued effectiveness of the program.

11. Persons should not be assigned to tasks requiring the use of respirators unless it has been determined by the respirator program administrator, using the guidelines of a physician, that they are physically and psychologically able to perform the work and use the equipment. This determination should be reviewed at least annually.

12. MESA/NIOSH certified respirators should be used for protection when they are available. Non-approved respirators generally are not recognized as providing adequate protection.

Now that the standard operating procedures and policies have been outlined, the real task begins implementing the procedures and maintaining an effective program. Again, it should be emphasized that this can only be accomplished with the full support of management and full acceptance and understanding by the employees.

Let us list the employers' and employees' responsibilities. It is the employers' responsibility to provide respiratory protective equipment when such equipment is necesary to protect the health of the employee, to provide respirators which are applicable and suitable for the purpose intended, and to establish and maintain an effective respiratory protection program.

It is the employees' responsibility to use the provided respiratory protection in accordance with instructions and training received, to guard against damage to the respirator, and to report any malfunction of the respirator to the responsible person for correction.

First, we must make sure that the standard operating procedures include:

All the information and guidance necessary for the proper selection, use, and care of the needed equipment.

Designation of the correct respirator for each job and an inventory system to identify the respirators and the employees to whom they were issued.

Written procedures covering safe use of respirators in dangerous atmospheres.

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