

To protect & serve

Personal protective equipment is clearly a must in plant and factory environments, yet problems with adoption are still reported. Brian Wall advises that PPE needs to be carefully monitored

With personal protective equipment (PPE), the obligations are surely clear? Employers are responsible for providing, replacing and paying for whatever is required to keep safe those who are working in potentially hazardous areas. Equally, they are responsible for educating and training wearers, and ensuring that PPE is appropriate and realistic to the task – while workers are responsible for wearing it.

On which note, the HSE makes a telling point: PPE should only be used once all other measures to control exposure have proved inadequate. Clearly, exhausting other methods and options has to be the starting point, but thereafter it's about ensuring that all PPE judged necessary by a risk assessment is readily available and fit for purpose – and that workers understand that its use is not optional.

Staying safe

And the latter is a serious point. HSE reminds plant managers, engineers and technicians that PPE “protects only the wearer while being worn”, and that, if it fails, “PPE offers no protection at all”, exposing said wearer to danger. In other words, it's all very well providing the correct and full range of equipment, but, if it isn't worn, or if it is partially open or removed while workers are in the hazardous area, it's of very little value.


That said, the range of PPE likely to be needed in a typical plant environment can be wide – from respirators to protective gloves, clothing and footwear, as well as eye protection. The precise equipment you require in any of these categories needs careful consideration. HSE advises that

suppliers, trade associations and manufacturers should be asked the following: is it suitable for the conditions; does it offer the right level of protection; what sort of training and maintenance is required; and how do I know when it needs replacing?

Also, says the HSE: “It is important that employees know why they need PPE and are trained to use it correctly. Otherwise it is unlikely to protect as required.” On that basis, other questions that need to be posed include: does it fit; is it comfortable; are all items compatible; does the PPE interfere with the job; and does PPE introduce other, unintended health risks – such as overheating or entanglement with machinery?

Note also that purchasing the right PPE is a big responsibility. Safety equipment that doesn't perform may cost lives. “Supplying a fake watch may be illegal, but it is unlikely to be life threatening,” points out David Lummis, chief executive at the British Safety Industry Federation (BSIF). “Supplying illegal or non-conforming PPE, however, could mean the difference between life and death.”

The BSIF set up its Registered Safety Supplier Scheme (RSSS) to help ensure that compliant and correct safety equipment is supplied to end users. “The scheme's shield acts as a signpost, so that people know they are buying from a reputable company,” comments Lummis.

If there is a single message to take away, it is that it's one thing to identify what PPE your workforce needs, but quite another getting them to keep it on. So make sure they are kitted out properly, and that they understand why they are wearing it and the risks to which they expose themselves and others, if they do not. 



Confidence through Compliance

For your own peace of mind, watch out for the Registered Safety Supplier Scheme logo

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

With recent estimates suggesting that around 4,000 deaths every year are due to COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), resulting from past workplace exposure, effective respiratory protection is clearly essential. “New developments in respiratory protective equipment (RPE) are having a positive impact on the effectiveness of RPE programmes, as companies have to adapt to keep up to date with the latest technologies and changes to the regulations,” states Mark Andrews, product manager of Air Purified at Scott Safety.

“RPE manufacturers have developed a new generation of products that have introduced smart features to improve the effectiveness of respiratory protection and these are streamlining RPE programmes,” he adds. Its Spirit Powered Air Respirator, for example, operates with either particle or combined particle and gas filters, and with an updated range of head-tops to offer protection in a wide range of hazardous environments.

