

Guidance on the Selection and Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

1. Introduction

The hierarchy of control is a systematic approach to managing workplace hazards that prioritises methods that eliminate or reduce risks at their source. It consists of five levels: elimination, substitution, engineering controls, administrative controls, and personal protective equipment (PPE).

Unlike the 'higher-level' controls, such as elimination and substitution, PPE is considered the lowest level of control or 'last line of defence' because it does not eliminate or mitigate the hazard itself but rather provides a physical barrier between the individual worker and the hazard. Consequently, PPE relies on individual compliance and proper usage to be effective, making it less reliable as a control measure; therefore, it should only be used in conjunction with other control measures to ensure safety in the workplace.

This document aims to provide an overview of the critical considerations, including regulatory requirements, for the effective selection and provision of PPE. This guidance should be used in conjunction with other issued guidance for specific PPE, such as gloves, eye protection, and other specialist equipment such as Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) and respirators.

2. Scope

For this guidance, PPE refers to all equipment (including, if required, protective clothing against the weather) that is intended to be worn by an individual at work to protect them from harm. It does not include uniforms, equipment used whilst playing competitive sports, or motorbike/bicycle helmets.

Requirements and performance criteria of specific PPE types are not within the scope of this guidance.

3. Definitions

Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) is a type of PPE designed to protect the wearer from inhalation of airborne hazardous substances such as microorganisms, silica dust, vapours, etc.

Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA) are portable devices that provide breathable air to individuals in hazardous environments, such as fires or oxygen-deficient spaces, where the air is contaminated with smoke, toxic gases, or insufficient oxygen. They consist of a face mask, a compressed air cylinder, a regulator to control airflow, a harness to carry the cylinder, and safety features like pressure gauges and alarms to ensure the wearer has a sufficient air supply.

4. Selection & Provision of PPE

The PPE legislation in the UK is primarily governed by the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992, which mandates that employers provide suitable PPE to employees exposed to risks. The Personal Protective Equipment at Work (Amendment) Regulations 2022 expanded these protections to include those workers with a more casual or irregular employment relationship working under contract for another party, often referred to as 'gig workers'.

4.1 Selection Criteria

If, following application of the hierarchy of control, it is considered that there is still a significant residual risk necessitating the provision of PPE, then the risk assessment should identify the type(s) and performance specifications required.

As a minimum, PPE must be fit for purpose, appropriately UKCA (UK Conformity Assessed) or CE marked¹ and must not introduce new risks to the wearer, for example, a glove which reduces dexterity during an intricate or complex process. It must be made available in a range of sizes and/or be adjustable to provide a comfortable fit for the intended users, as well as offering the appropriate level of protection from the identified hazards, including compliance with any relevant BS EN / ISO standard.

Other general considerations include the environmental conditions in which the activity takes place, the duration of the activity, the level of physical effort required whilst wearing the PPE, and any requirements for visibility and communication whilst wearing.

Providers should also consider the compatibility of selected PPE and ensure performance isn't compromised where more than one item of PPE is worn simultaneously, e.g., ear protection preventing eye protectors from being worn correctly, etc.

4.2 Provision and Maintenance

Arrangements should be made to ensure that all identified PPE is provided free of charge to employees and any other individuals for all activities hosted or under the control of the university.

Suitable replacement PPE must always be readily available for users, and so local managers must maintain adequate supplies of spare PPE.

¹ CE marking remains valid in Great Britain at time of writing due to an indefinite extension in August 2023

a) Provision of Respiratory Protective Equipment & Fit testing

Fit testing for Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE) is a mandatory process to ensure that tight-fitting respirators form an effective seal on the wearer's face and provide the intended level of protection. Fit testing must be conducted before a respirator is used in the workplace for the first time and repeated regularly, especially when there are changes in facial features or equipment. There are two main types of fit tests: **qualitative**, which relies on the wearer's sensory detection of a test agent, and **quantitative**, which uses instruments to measure leakage. Further information on RPE, including Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus (SCBA), and fit testing can be found within 'HS G905 Guidance on the Use of Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE)'.

b) Maintenance and Inspections

PPE needs to be kept clean and in good repair, and the manufacturer's maintenance schedule must be adhered to (including recommended replacement periods and shelf lives). Simple maintenance may be carried out by the wearer (if appropriately trained), but more intricate repairs should only be done by those identified as being competent for such repairs.

There may be occasions where an individual wishes to use or select their own PPE, for example, cold weather gear they already own, prescription eye protection, etc., which may be appropriate so long as the equipment has been assessed for suitability. This will be considered on a case-by-case basis and is at the discretion of the accountable person and should be recorded in activity risk assessments.

4.3 Training & Instruction

All individuals must be provided with adequate information, instruction, and training on how to use, maintain, and store PPE. Training should convey the importance of using PPE correctly and consistently, its intended function, as well as its limitations. It is important to ensure that individuals understand that PPE does not guarantee protection from harm and that they should not be complacent about the risks arising from hazardous activities.

Training should cover how to put on, adjust, wear, and remove PPE correctly. Training must also include how to identify faults and performance issues and what action to take in the event of damage, malfunction, or failure, including reporting and whether repair or replacement is appropriate.

All individuals must ensure they comply with the requirements for safe and effective use of PPE, and report any damage, loss, or faults without delay. Any individual who fails to comply with any of these requirements may be subject to disciplinary action.

Managers and supervisors must also receive adequate training to ensure their staff and students are using it correctly.

4.4 Shared PPE

When providing PPE that is intended for shared use, there are several key considerations that must be considered to ensure compliance with health and safety regulations.

Firstly, to ensure adequate hygiene and sanitation of shared PPE, arrangements should be in place for equipment to be cleaned and disinfected between uses to an appropriate standard, and provisions made for suitable storage to enable effective drying and maintenance of cleanliness.

Secondly, equipment should be sufficiently adjustable to fit all intended users, and consideration should be given to comfort, as poorly fitting equipment can result in improper use, compromising user safety.

Finally, maintaining sufficient availability of shared PPE so that there are no unacceptable delays or restrictions in accessing suitable PPE.

4.5 Sustainability

When providing reusable PPE, care should be given to ensuring that, as with shared PPE, suitable arrangements are in place for cleaning and decontamination, including storage. Additionally, durability considerations are essential, not just for its intended use but also against repeated cleaning and decontamination without a reduction in performance. It is therefore critical that robust inspection, maintenance and replacement programmes are in place, including suitable training and competency in delivering these effectively.

5. Other Considerations

When selecting PPE, accessibility considerations are essential to ensure safety, usability, and dignity for all individuals, including those with disabilities. In addition to general considerations when selecting PPE for different body sizes and shapes, due care should be given to varying physical capability, e.g. limited dexterity, and compatibility with assistive technologies e.g., wheelchairs, hearing aids, prosthetics, etc. The selection of inclusive PPE designs not only enhances protection but also promotes dignity and independence in the workplace.

When selecting single-use disposable PPE, it is essential to ensure that appropriate disposal systems are in place, taking into account any possible contamination that may have occurred during use.

See also:

- **Guidance on the Use of Gloves**
- **Guidance on the Use of Respiratory Protective Equipment (RPE)**
- **Guidance on the Use of Eye Protection**
- **Guidance on the Use of Laboratory Coats & Other Protective Clothing**
- **Guidance on the Use of Protective Footwear**

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