OSHA Guidance Instructs Employers Regarding Masks in Workplace

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On June 10, 2020, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) released new guidance, in the form of frequently asked questions and answers, regarding the use of masks in the workplace.[1] The new guidance serves to help employers ensure employees know how to properly wear masks and which type of mask is appropriate.

OSHA explains the difference between cloth face coverings, surgical masks, and respirators. In particular, cloth face coverings are not considered personal protective equipment (PPE) under OSHA regulations and are not intended to be used when workers need protection from exposure to occupational hazards. Accordingly, except where required by state or local law, employers are not required to provide cloth face coverings to employees. However, employers can choose to ensure cloth face coverings are worn as a feasible means of abatement in a control plan designed to address hazards from COVID-19.

Even though cloth face coverings are not considered PPE, OSHA recommends employers encourage workers to wear face coverings at work, as they prevent wearers who unknowingly have COVID-19 from spreading infectious respiratory droplets to others. Cloth face coverings are recommended for all persons, consistent with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, and if appropriate for the work environment and job tasks.[2] Where cloth masks are not appropriate,
employers can provide PPE, such as face shields and/or surgical masks. However, cloth face coverings and surgical masks cannot be used in place of respirators when respirators are otherwise required. Employers should still rely on a variety of measures to prevent worker exposures to respiratory hazards before relying on PPE.

Even if employers decide to provide workers with cloth face masks, they should still require, to the extent possible and in coordination with guidance from medical and public health authorities, employees to observe infection-control practices such as social distancing, regular handwashing, and other measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Employers should also consider the accessibility of employees wearing cloth face masks and potentially provide masks with clear windows to facilitate interaction between employees and members of the public who need to lip-read to communicate.

OSHA's new guidance provides employers with additional considerations as businesses implement state and local face-covering requirements in workplaces during the pandemic.


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