

# Wear the right respirator, the right way

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**W**earing a respirator on the farm is for one purpose — to protect you from hazardous dust, gases and biological agents to ensure a long and fulfilling life.

Not everyone knows that there are different styles and sizes of respirators, which can make selecting the right one confusing.

Fortunately, experts who work in the ag health and safety community have developed quick reference guides to help you with the first step. Find out what type of respiratory protection to wear at [tinyurl.com/3dhfpdj5](https://tinyurl.com/3dhfpdj5).

If a respirator is needed for a certain task, make sure the respirator is a good fit for the wearer. This includes asking yourself:

=Am I in good physical condition to wear the respirator?

=Does the respirator fit me well enough to protect my lungs if any contaminated air passes through the filter?

If you are applying or handling a WPS-labeled (Worker Protection Standard) pesticide, you are required to follow these next steps. Farmers might not have to follow these steps, but they are a global best practice. In fact, this procedure is required of workers in every other industry throughout industrialized nations.

Let's assume you are non-exempt so we can review what to do when a pesticide falls under WPS with the phrase "agricultural use requirements" visible on the label.

The first step is to have a medical evaluation to ensure that wearing a respirator is not dangerous to the person wearing it. This evaluation consists of a screening questionnaire, followed by a review by a medical provider to make sure existing physical conditions will not be negatively impacted by wearing a respirator.

You should communicate with your doctor about any pulmonary or cardiac diseases before wearing a respirator and discuss possible concerns with wearing a respirator.

Once you are cleared to wear a respirator, you want to select one that fits your face. The respirator must form a good seal around the entire perimeter of the respirator so that contaminated air doesn't get through without first going through the respirator filter, cartridge and/or canister. To do this, a fit test procedure is performed to make sure the respirator used is the right size.

To receive a fit test, the person wearing the respirator must shave facial hair, remove facial jewelry, and put up long hair into a ponytail. This allows the respirator to have the best chance of forming a proper seal. No smoking, drinking, eating or gum chewing is allowed 15 minutes before testing. This guarantees the device will adhere to your face, forming the best air-tight seal possible.

A comprehensive fit test guide for agricultural pesticides handling is available at [tinyurl.com/2s3cf2wh](https://tinyurl.com/2s3cf2wh).

In September, the Great Plains Center along with the Ag Safety & Health Alliance trained Extension personnel in Cerro Gordo, Dubuque, Franklin-Hardin, Warren and Palo Alto counties in Iowa, who now have skills and equipment to help perform these tests for farmers in their region. They can test the fit of disposable particulate filtering facepiece respirators (N95 FFRs), half-facepiece respirators and full-facepiece respirators.

We recommend completing a fit test every year — more often if you have had changes in weight or facial shape (surgery, scarring, significant dental changes), to make sure you don't need a new size or style of respirator.

Once your fit testing appointment has identified a style and size of respirator that fits your face, know that there is one last step to make sure that the respirator will perform the way it is supposed to: Perform a personal seal check every time you wear a respirator.

To do this, put the respirator on and adjust it so it is comfortable. Then, you are going to block off the flow of air briefly to make sure it doesn't leak.

A positive-pressure check will have you exhale while covering up the exhaust valve (typically under your chin on an elastomeric respirator, but for an FFR, cover the surface of the mask with both hands). When you exhale, you should feel the respirator slightly push away from your face but not leak air outside of the respirator.

Then, the negative-pressure check will have you breathe in while covering the inhalation areas (cover the cartridges in an elastomeric respirator or again cover the filter surface of an FFR with your hands). You will feel the subtle compression of the respirator against your face as you inhale. Hold your breath for a few seconds in this position and make sure the mask isn't leaking.

Every time you put a respirator on to protect your health, you want to repeat this seal check.

Ultimately, if you are covered by the Worker Protection Standard, these three steps are required if your label indicates you must wear respiratory protection. For everyone else, it is just good practice.

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