Beards & Respirators: What’s the connection?

Most people are familiar with “Movember” and “No-Shave-November.” They are opportunities to grow mustaches or beards to raise awareness for influential charity projects. The Movember Foundation donates the money it raises to projects and programs related to prostate cancer, testicular cancer, and men’s mental health issues. The official No-Shave November movement encourages men and women to donate the money they would have otherwise spent on shaving-related products and services to the American Cancer Society. While these foundations are dedicated to helping the men and women affected with cancer, mental health, etc., they may have an effect on employees’ protection from airborne contaminants if respiratory protection is used.

How Can Facial Hair Affect Respirator Use?

Prior to respirator use, employees must complete a medical evaluation questionnaire and obtain a medical clearance from a licensed professional stating they are fit to wear a respirator. This clearance is given provided that the employee was thoroughly evaluated based on their current medical condition, medical history, and day to day use of substances and habits that may inhibit their use of a respirator. Upon receiving clearance for respirator use, OSHA requires employees to be fit tested. So what is a fit test? A “fit test” tests the seal between the respirator’s facepiece and your face to make sure that the respirator is forming a tight seal so that no harmful substances can permeate it. Having an excessive amount of facial hair can affect this process so employees should be clean shaven. After passing a fit test, you must use the exact same make, model, style, and size respirator on the job. Follow-up medical evaluations should be conducted if an employee has a positive response to specific areas of Appendix C or for those evaluations showing the need for a follow-up examination. Fit tests must be completed annually even if the make/model of the respirator remains the same.

Two Types of Fit Tests: Qualitative vs Quantitative

Qualitative fit testing is a pass/fail test method that uses your sense of taste or smell, or your reaction to an irritant in order to detect leakage into the respirator facepiece. Qualitative fit testing does not measure the actual amount of leakage. Whether the respirator passes or fails the test is based simply on you detecting leakage of the test substance into your facepiece.

Quantitative fit testing uses a machine to measure the actual amount of leakage into the facepiece and does not rely upon your sense of taste, smell, or irritation in order to detect leakage. The respirators used during this type of fit testing will have a probe attached to the facepiece that will be connected to the machine by a hose.

So remember, while organizations such as Movember, and No-Shave November are great causes, safety is always the main concern! Keep clean shaven for a tight seal and make sure you get fit-tested annually! Monetary donations can always be made to show your support for foundations such as these.

Healthily & Happily yours,
Emily Arelt