



## Personal Protective Equipment

Personal protective equipment: all those easy-to-use items that your staff automatically put on to keep them safe – right? If only it were that simple.

**You have to provide the right equipment for the task.** Start off with doing a hazard assessment. What tasks are done? What are the hazards from those?

Mechanics and body techs are exposed to flying particles if they grind or sand (or even if they bang on a stuck part when they're standing under a car). So they need safety glasses with side shields. Those only protect the eyes, not the face. So require a face shield for heavy grinding. Welding? Eye and skin protection against the ultraviolet radiation is needed, so you need to provide welding helmets.

Detailers and painters can splash chemicals into their eyes. So they need eye protection, too. If they're working with an acid, such as wheel brightener, the eye protection needs to be good enough to block a splash. Require safety goggles for that task.

Don't forget skin contact. If anyone's using a chemical that can burn (again, like the acids), chemical resistant gloves need to be worn. If the chemicals could cause long term skin damage (lacquer thinner, for instance), gloves are needed. But don't buy the cheapest gloves your supplier provides. Gloves differ in how well they resist different chemicals. Lacquer thinner is really tough on gloves. Partswasher fluid isn't. Paint hardener can go right through latex gloves, with no signs of damage. How do you know which is appropriate? Check with the glove manufacturer. Many manufacturers have information about chemical resistance on their websites.

Is breathing the chemical a problem? For jobs such as spray painting, respirators may be needed. As with gloves, those must be suitable for the chemical. If the concern is just dust in air, an N-95 dust mask may be okay. Spraypainting? The minimum allowed would be half mask respirator with organic vapor cartridges and prefilters. Remember, if respirators are used, you need to have a respiratory protection program. All collision repair facilities need a written respirator program. Very few, if any, mechanical repair shops should need one.

So noisy you have to shout to talk to people? Require hearing protection. Ear plugs and ear muffs are rated for different noise levels. But the differences aren't significant for repair shop operations. It's more important that they be available and used correctly than how high a noise reduction rating they have.

**The equipment has to be available.** As the boss, that's your responsibility. The employer is required to provide the appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) at no cost to the employee. That means you provide the needed gloves, the appropriate welding helmet, and the required respirator. It doesn't mean that you have to go out and buy everyone a \$500 pair of fancy glasses. You have to pay the minimum cost of the correct PPE. If an employee wants to upgrade to the \$500 pair of rhinestone-studded glasses, that's his option. You're responsible only for the safety part of that cost.

Paying for non-prescription safety glasses isn't a big deal. You can buy decent ones for under \$5. What if your workers need prescription eyewear? In that case, you could provide safety glasses that fit over their prescription lenses, but that's an ugly choice. Those are bulky and awkward. Instead, pay for the cost of prescription lenses and frames. Your employee will have to pay for the eye exam, of course. You can control your cost by specifying which frames you'll pay for. Again, employees can choose to upgrade, if they pay for it themselves.

Remember that PPE wears out. You can set up a reasonable replacement schedule. Or you could require employees to turn in the used equipment before you'll issue new ones. Treat PPE like any other nondurable good used in your shop.

**The equipment has to be comfortable to use.** To state the obvious, PPE only works if it's worn. If users find it uncomfortable or cumbersome, they'll balk at using it. So give people a choice of types. Offer more than one style and size of safety glasses. Offer ear muffs in addition to ear plugs, and keep at least two different types of ear plugs available. Give them the option of different brands and sizes of respirators. Your workers aren't all one size, so their PPE can't be, either.

**The equipment has to be used.** If PPE isn't worn, it doesn't work. That's actually a common problem. Safety glasses don't do the job if they're sitting on a tool box instead of on your face. But many people just don't wear them. The reason, often – they're not in the habit.

You need to require that employees use their PPE. Start by making sure everyone knows what's required for what tasks. Again, it might seem obvious to you, but never assume it's obvious to everyone. Go over how to use the equipment correctly. Safety glasses are easy: put them on, don't use solvents or harsh cleaners on them, and replace them if they're scratched. Earplugs need to be inserted deep into the ear canal – they're often not inserted correctly, so don't provide the protection they should. Duct tape may have many uses, but it isn't to be used for repairing PPE. If ear muffs are worn out or safety glasses are scratched, do employees know how to get replacements?

It isn't enough to provide the PPE and explain how to use it. You also need to make sure it is actually used. That's your responsibility as the employer: to require the use where needed. If employees are bad about using safety glasses, ask them why. Perhaps a different style might improve compliance. If they don't use the PPE because they forget, or just don't want to, treat it as any other task they're supposed to do, but neglect. What would you do if a mechanic forgot to replace a lug nut? Or forgot to report a problem with a job? Wearing protective equipment is part of doing the job correctly.

It takes repetition to make something a habit. If employees aren't using their PPE now, start a new policy today, requiring the use. Give them a month, with frequent reminders, to learn the new habits. Then start enforcing your policy.

We caution that it's very difficult to get employees to use their PPE when no one else does. If you want employees to wear safety glasses in the shop, you need to do so every time you walk in there. Your risk of an eye injury from just walking through the shop is low. But you need to set the example.

*This article is intended to provide general information (not advice) about current safety topics. To discuss your specific concerns and how CHESS may help, please contact CHESS at 651-481-9787 or [chess@chess-safety.com](mailto:chess@chess-safety.com).*