



PPE for Emergency Response and Recovery Workers



Photo: U.S. Air Force

When an emergency event occurs or a disaster strikes, first responders and recovery workers are often the first ones to arrive on-site. First responders may need personal protective equipment (PPE) to keep them safe during natural disasters, biological hazards, accidental releases, and terrorism events. PPE can be used to minimize worker exposure to hazards, but they are the last line of defense after engineering controls and administrative controls.

Engineering controls involve physically changing a machine or work environment such as installing enclosures for noisy equipment. Administrative controls involve changing how or when workers do their jobs, such as scheduling work and rotating workers to reduce exposures.

This pamphlet is intended to remind employees and employers of the importance of PPE, but it should not be used as a sole source of worker protection guidance for emergency response and recovery activities. For more information see [osha.gov/emergency-preparedness/ppe](https://www.osha.gov/emergency-preparedness/ppe).

Role of PPE

The use of PPE is effective at protecting workers from safety and health hazards including physical and adverse health effects.

Employers must ensure that workers are provided the appropriate PPE, when necessary, at no cost and that they are properly trained on how to use it.

Important Steps for Employers

Develop a disaster-specific health and safety plan that includes the following:

- Conduct a hazard assessment to determine what safety and health hazards workers may encounter and reassess if conditions change;
- List worker responsibilities;
- Follow and implement the hierarchy of controls—including engineering and administrative controls where feasible;
- Determine what PPE workers need. During the initial response, when all hazards may not immediately be known, carefully consider the use of the highest level of PPE available;
- Train each worker required to use PPE in a language they can understand;
- Provide medical exams and/or fit testing, as required by OSHA standards (1910.120 and Subpart I);
- Regularly review and update PPE needs as job tasks and hazards change; and
- Provide instructions for reporting work-related injuries or illnesses.

Worker Safety Practices

- Use PPE according to the manufacturer's instructions;
- Know what kind of protective equipment is necessary;
- Understand the limitations of PPE;

- Know how to put on, adjust, wear, and take off PPE;
- Maintain, inspect, and clean PPE per manufacturer recommendations; and
- Store PPE properly to prevent damage.

Know the Four Levels of PPE

Emergency response-type PPE is classified into four levels, ranging from the most protective (Level A) to the least protective (Level D). Workers must be trained on the conditions that require PPE and the procedures to prevent and reduce exposure, including decontamination and proper disposal procedures.

LEVEL A* Highest level of respiratory, skin, and eye protection.	LEVEL B* Highest level of respiratory protection with a lower level of skin protection.
LEVEL C* Same level of skin protection as Level B, with a lower level of respiratory protection.	LEVEL D No respiratory protection and only minimal skin protection.

* Level requires respirators that are approved by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH).

For more information, visit [osha.gov/emergency-preparedness/ppe](https://www.osha.gov/emergency-preparedness/ppe) or call OSHA at 1-800-321-OSHA (6742), TTY 1-877-889-5627.