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Southwest Center
FOR AGRICULTURAL HEALTH, INJURY PREVENTION, AND EDUCATION

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Cloth Face Coverings vs. Respirators

What's the difference and when should we use them?

Farming in the era of COVID-19: the work is essential but how do we protect ourselves and our employees effectively in the process?

The best protection controls right now are going to continue to be wearing face coverings, sanitizing hands, and performing temperature checks. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has recommendations about respiratory protection involving cloth face coverings. Some farms may already have other types of protection on hand, like respirators. Respirators and cloth face coverings provide different types of protection and prevent exposures in different ways. Here is the breakdown on different options and when to use them:

Cloth Face Coverings:

Currently, cloth face covering are not mandated in most areas; however, it is highly encouraged to wear a face covering. Cloth face coverings can be homemade and are reusable. See link below. They function to protect others around you from the airborne droplets you're exhaling but they do not protect you from the airborne droplets other are exhaling, which is why it's important for each person to be wearing a cloth face covering.

Be advised that the cloth face covering does not and should not allow workers to be closer than 6 ft. If workers are working closely, a mask or face shield should be required. For tasks where respiratory protection is required, cloth face coverings are not an adequate substitute for a NIOSH certified respirator.

Cloth face coverings should be removed carefully and washed regularly. It is also important to wash your hands for 20 seconds after handling face coverings.

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Disposable N95 Respirators:

NIOSH-certified respirators meet certain standards of protection, depending on the model, and form a seal on the wearer's face to filter all incoming air. For example, the popular N95 disposable respirator protects the wearer from up to 95% of particulates when worn properly. The 'N' signifies that it is not resistant to oil, whereas an 'R' or 'P' preceding the number signify different levels of resistance to oil. KN95 respirators are often no more effective than cloth masks and are not designed to be reused. You should only wear respirator models, which you have been fit-tested in and which match the task you are completing. A passed fit test ensures that a particular respirator will properly protect you from harmful exposures. Without a fit test, you could risk wearing the wrong size respirator, which would not be effective at protecting you.

Respirators are currently in short supply with priority for inventory being given to healthcare workers working in high-exposure settings. For farmers, that means that it may be difficult to purchase more of these even though you may have tasks that require you or your employees to wear a respirator. It is important, then, to use your inventory of disposable respirators only when the hazards of your workplace require it. Each worker should have been fit tested in the model you have available. The shortage also makes donning and doffing (putting on and taking off) your respirators and properly maintaining them very important in order to increase their longevity and reduce your exposure. Disposable respirators are not designed to be reused again and again. Take care to don and doff respirators carefully and slowly to avoid contamination on the inside of the respirator and store the respirator in a clean brown paper bag.

Unlike in a healthcare setting, disposable respirators worn on farms are likely to get soiled or hard to breathe through more quickly because of the nature of the dusty or dirty work that gets done while wearing them. Disposable respirators should then be disposed of when soiled, hard to breathe through, or damaged. Always wash your hands after handling.

Other respirators like half-face or full-face respirators have a longer lifespan when used and maintained properly. These can be reused and so over time may be a more cost-effective solution. Filters or cartridges should be stored separate from respirators and the respirator itself should be washed after wearing. Respirators with exhale valves will not protect others from the airborne droplets being exhaled. If you have respirators with exhale valves, a cloth face covering should be worn over the exhale valve.

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www.nycamh.org/covid-19.

For more about respirators, cloth face coverings, and COVID-19 information for farm workers, visit www.uthct.edu/swagc-covid19-resources-for-agricultural-workers.

With questions, contact the Southwest Ag Center at 903-877-5998 or Amanda.Wickman@uthct.edu

Visit our social media pages for COVID-19 related health tips and info.



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