Health Care Risk Advisor

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OSHA Releases Additional Respirator Guidance

On Apr. 24, 2020, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) issued interim enforcement guidance on reusing disposable N95 filtering facepiece respirators (N95 FFRs) that have been decontaminated.

The guidance applies to workplaces where workers need respirators to protect against exposure to infectious agents that could be inhaled into the respiratory system, including during care of patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 and other activities that could result in respiratory exposure to SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes the coronavirus.

If respiratory protection must be used, and acceptable alternatives are not available for use in accordance with OSHA's previous coronavirus-related enforcement memoranda, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health has identified available research that suggests the following methods offer the most promise for decontaminating FFRs:

- Vaporous hydrogen peroxide;
- Ultraviolet germicidal irradiation; and/or
- Moist heat (i.e., using an oven).

If those methods are not available, microwave-generated steam or liquid hydrogen peroxide could also be suitable.

Under the guidance, the following methods are not considered acceptable unless objective data that sufficiently demonstrates the safety and effectiveness of such methods becomes available:

- Autoclaving;
- Dry heat;
- Isopropyl alcohol;
- Soap;
- Dry microwave irradiation;
- Chlorine bleach;
- Disinfectant wipes, regardless of impregnation (i.e., chemical saturation); and/or
- Ethylene oxide.

According to OSHA, employers should investigate the effectiveness of any particular decontamination method used for the specific filtering facepiece respirator model to be decontaminated. What's more, health care employers should be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of any decontamination method used against the likely contaminant(s) (i.e., pathogens) of concern, and that the decontamination method used does not produce additional safety hazards.

The interim guidance is now in effect and will remain in place until further guidance.

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