



Personal Protective Equipment

Why Unisex PPE Doesn't Work for Women and What to Do About It

Kellie Escoto | Sep 29, 2022

The problem with clothing meant to fit everybody is that it tends to fit very few bodies particularly well.

That's a drawback that can carry harsh consequences—from severe injury to high regulatory fines—when the garb in question is personal protective equipment used to protect employees from sometimes hazardous environments inside American machine shops and factories.

Employers are required by the *U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration* (OSHA) to provide PPE from overalls to hoods, helmets and glasses to protect workers from job-site risks, and the regulator specifies that the gear must fit each employee properly.

While unisex PPE was largely sufficient to meet that standard when the industrial workforce was made up mostly of men, the increasing number of women taking factory jobs today is forcing employers to rethink their tactics.

Many are starting to replace unisex items with gender-specific gear they believe will keep their employees safer in roles from welding to operating heavy machinery and processing food. Among the reasons is that employees are more likely to remove PPE when it's uncomfortable or fits poorly. Doing so not only leaves them more susceptible to injury but their employers more vulnerable to citations for violating OSHA's protective-gear rule, violations of which cost the manufacturing industry **over \$850,000** last year alone.

Is Your PPE the Right Size? Try a Fit Test

You've taken measurements, gathered sizes and ordered the appropriate personal protective equipment for each of your workers. The next step? Make sure it fits properly.

Just like trying on clothing, it's important to test safety gear to ensure that the fit matches up to the measurements on the spec sheet.

Have your employees try on their PPE and answer standard questions to ensure that they're safe and comfortable.

Here are a few you can ask:

1. Does the product fit comfortably? Are there any concerns with the product that might lead you to take it off while working?
2. Does it restrict motion? Is it too tight or stiff?
3. Is there excess or baggy material?
4. Is there gapping in places that should fit snugly, i.e., around a respirator mask or glove?
5. Does the equipment slide, slip or move around when you wear it?

Change won't come overnight, however. For years, safety gear has been designed **based** on data collected in the middle of the 20th century.

"These decades-old data do not represent, on average and collectively, the sizes and body types of today's workers, who are much more diverse in age, gender and ethnicity," says Hongwei Hsiao, former chief of the protective technology branch in the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's Division of Safety Research.

Nearly 30 percent of manufacturing employees today are women. And while they are often underrepresented in safety-gear sizing, it's not only women who are looking for a better fit.

Here's how to find equipment that works for every employee.

PPE Gloves for Women

Gloves protect workers from a variety of hazards, sharp objects and extreme temperatures among them.

If they're too big, then gaps around the wrists may leave skin exposed to dangerous contaminants or chemicals, while excess material can make wearers more likely to drop objects they're handling.

Correcting those problems for female workers isn't as simple as buying smaller sizes of the same gloves that their male colleagues wear: Women tend to have smaller palms and wrists and narrower fingers than men.

Luckily, some suppliers, such as **PRO-SAFE**, provide sizing based on hand measurements, including palm width, wrist circumference and total hand length.

Read More: *How To Pick The Right PPE: Outer Protective Gear*

Before ordering, check the product's spec sheet and choose the proper size for each worker based on those measurements. If your employees tend to layer up—for example, wearing a single-use glove to protect against contaminants under a cut-resistant glove for food processing—keep the extra bulk in mind when selecting the right fit.

Protective Head Gear for Women

Unisex gear that protects the head and face—think hard hats, safety glasses and respirators—is often too large or wide on women, who typically have smaller heads and narrower faces than men.

When eyewear is too wide, it may slip down the bridge of the nose, where it might either fall off completely or workers might take it off in frustration, leaving their eyes unprotected.

Similar problems exist with respirator masks, which are more likely to fail a fit test for female employees than male employees, according to a recent study by the University of *Southampton*.

Rather than opting for universal sizing in headwear and face protection, choose sized or adjustable options to fit each employee.

Select respirators and masks with adjustable straps, such as *3M's half mask respirator with 4-point suspension*, for a snug fit. The same goes for hard hats—forgo universal sizing and order an inner suspension that fits an employee's head circumference for optimal safety and comfort.

Instead of ordering safety glasses in a universal size, meaning they are wide enough to fit most faces, get glasses that come in a range of sizes, and consider a pair with adjustable temples, such as *UVEX's framed safety glasses*, to ensure that they fit each person just right.

Women's Safety Shirts and Shoes

Clothing—including shirts, vests and footwear—is often where sizing differences are most obvious. After all, everyday clothing comes in a wide range of sizes and styles to fit different bodies.

Since safety apparel doesn't, the added bulk on women or people with smaller-than-average bodies can restrict motion, making it hard to work comfortably and increasing the risk of excess fabric being caught in machinery.

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Footwear made for men can be wide and heavy on women's feet, leading to blisters and trouble walking that could result in short- or long-term musculoskeletal pain.

To mitigate the safety concerns that come along with ill-fitting apparel, many brands are beginning to introduce lines tailored to better fit women's shoulders, waists and chests.

In some cases, that even includes maternity sizing for women who are pregnant. The shift toward PPE made for all genders and body sizes, rather than a single standard, is a positive sign of the growing diversity in the manufacturing industry.

How have you helped workers find the right fit for PPE? Share your tips in the comments below.

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