

Size Matters When it Comes to PPE

What's at Stake?

Ill-fitting protective clothing and equipment is universally problematic in workplace safety. It deters workers from performing job-related tasks efficiently and safely. This can be especially true for women. The limited availability of PPE designed specifically for the shape of a woman's body, is a critical workplace health and safety issue.

What's the Danger?

Most of the time, women requiring PPE 'make do' with equipment designed for men. Women who work at mostly male sites are often reluctant to draw attention to their safety needs.

Ill-fitting gloves pose one of the biggest dangers. Over-sized gloves can cause a female worker to grasp a tool tighter than she should to get a good grip. Ill-fitting gloves also lead to lots of errors and make it hard to perform tasks requiring fine, detailed movements. And, as with all loose clothing, poor-fitting gloves may get caught in equipment, with horrible consequences.

Here's an example. To try and cope with poorly fitted gloves, a female worker stuffed cotton in the fingers of the gloves, put tape at the wrist, and tacked the top with staples to stop sparks from getting down the sleeve. Despite her efforts, the dexterity of her fingers was greatly reduced. While using a grinder, she broke two fingers.

Goggles and masks are two other types of PPE that might not fit female workers properly. If goggles don't fit right, debris and other materials may get past them and cause injury to the eyes. And a mask that doesn't fit properly may provide little or no protection against airborne hazards.

How to Protect Yourself

Here are six ways workers can ensure they have perfectly fitting PPE.

1. Be vocal and assertive about PPE needs.
2. Be supportive of co-workers who are assertive about their PPE needs.
3. Be proactive. Know your size requirements in all PPE you need to wear. Inform your employer of your size.
4. Voice your concerns about your PPE to your employer or supervisor, joint health and safety committee, or health and safety representative.
5. Report all hazards including poor-fitting PPE or PPE that is damaged or worn.
6. Use your right to refuse work if the work is dangerous given the dysfunctional PPE provided.

Final Word

Size Matters for PPE fit and performance. Ill-fitting protective equipment jeopardizes the health and safety of female workers and their co-workers.