

'Hot Topics' provide basic guidance on common workplace Health & Safety requirements. They use a simple 'Q&A' approach to convey key messages, but are not intended as an authoritative interpretation of every aspect of the applicable Health & Safety legislation.

Hot Topic 02: Personal protective equipment (v01, 01-Apr14)

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1. What is personal protective equipment?

Personal protective equipment, usually abbreviated to 'PPE', is any equipment, including clothing affording protection against the weather, that is intended to be worn by a person at work to protect them against one or more risks to their Health & Safety, and any accessory designed to meet that objective.

2. Is there any law that covers PPE?

Yes. PPE is covered by the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992 and further guidance is contained in its supporting approved code of practice, L25.

3. What categories of PPE are there?

The main categories of PPE are:

- head protection, i.e. helmets;
- eye protection, i.e. glasses, goggles and visors;
- foot protection, i.e. shoes and boots;
- hand and arm protection, i.e. gloves, gauntlets and armlets;
- hearing protection, i.e. ear plugs and ear muffs; and
- body protection, i.e. coveralls, aprons, spats, high-visibility clothing, etc.

4. What safety signs indicate that PPE must be worn?

The need to wear PPE is indicated by the presence of a mandatory safety sign (refer to 'Hot Topic 01: Safety signs') and this safety sign means that the wearing of eye protection is mandatory.



Sometimes a safety sign will have an additional information board that provides further explanation about the PPE that must be worn, i.e. specifying the impact grade of glasses.

5. What if more than one item of PPE must be worn at the same time?

If more than one item of PPE must be worn at the same time, they must be carefully selected to ensure compatibility, e.g. the head strap on a face visor could reduce the protection afforded by a pair of earmuffs.

However, sometimes PPE can be combined into a single item to help maximise the protection offered, e.g. a safety helmet fitted with a face visor and earmuffs to ensure adequate head, eye and hearing protection when using a powered disc-cutter or a chainsaw.

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6. Does PPE need to be made to a particular standard?

Yes. All PPE must comply with relevant European Standards and any applicable standards are, usually, marked on the item of PPE, i.e. on a label or tag or by being stamped. Some items of PPE, especially ear plugs used as hearing protection, may have their applicable standard(s) marked on container.

There are many standards that cover the design, method of test, etc of PPE, including:

- EN 388: Protective gloves against mechanical risks;
- EN 374: Protective gloves against chemicals and micro-organisms;
- EN 166: Specification for personal eye protection;
- EN 397: Specification for industrial safety helmets;
- EN 352: Hearing protectors. Safety requirements and testing.

7. Can an employer charge an employee for PPE, even if it is lost or damaged?

No. Section 9 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 specifically prohibits an employer from charging an employee for anything that is provided in the interests of Health & Safety. This includes PPE, even when it has been lost or is damaged.

However, Section 7 of the HSW Act places a duty on employees at work to ensure their own Health & Safety and to co-operate with their employer; this would include looking after any PPE that they have been provided with.

8. Must an employee wear the PPE that is provided?

Yes. Employees have a duty under both Section 7 of the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and Regulation 10 to wear any PPE that has been provided by their employer to ensure their Health & Safety.

9. What information and training must be given regarding the use of PPE?

PPE is, in effect, the last level of protection that is offered against a workplace hazard and risk, and is often provided to reduce the potential risk or severity of an injury.

Therefore, it is important that employees are properly instructed and trained on the correct use, wearing and adjustment of PPE.

Wherever possible, formal records of such instruction and training should be maintained.

10. Where should PPE be worn?

In simple terms, PPE should be worn anywhere where risks to Health & Safety are not adequately controlled by other means, e.g. where elimination or engineering controls are insufficient to control a workplace hazard or risk, and where the use of appropriate PPE would reduce the risk of an injury or a case of work related ill-health.

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11. How is the need for PPE identified?

Normally, the need for PPE is identified following a workplace risk assessment where workplace hazards are identified and their risks assessed.

The risk assessment should provide enough information on the workplace hazard to allow the correct selection of the most appropriate PPE, e.g. where there is a risk of an eye injury due to flying materials or mechanical impact, a suitable impact grade pair of goggles, or where there are hazardous substances in use, an appropriate chemical grade visor.

The use of PPE would be recorded as a control measure in a risk assessment record.

12. Where should PPE be stored?

All PPE must be stored in an appropriate facility to ensure that it neither contaminates other work or personal clothing nor can be contaminated, e.g. leaving it lying around in the workplace where it could be contaminated by a hazardous dust.

13. Where can I find out more about PPE?

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has published a leaflet, 'A short guide to the Personal Protective Equipment at Work Regulations 1992', IND(G)174, that provides further guidance on the provision and use of PPE in the workplace.

A copy of the leaflet can be downloaded free from HSE's website.