

## Silica Dust: Is Your Team Protected?

It's so small you can't see it. You can't smell it. Yet silica dust could gravely affect your health. Fortunately, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) is trying to do something about it.

### What is silica dust?

Silica is a common mineral found in the Earth's crust and is prevalent in many materials common on construction sites—including sand, concrete, masonry, rock, granite and landscaping materials. When these items are cut, ground, drilled, crushed or otherwise disturbed, silica dust is created. Inhaling these silica particles leads to increased health risks including lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and kidney disease.

### The new rules

Recently, OSHA issued a new set of standards to reduce the Permissible Exposure Level (PEL) to 50 micrograms per cubic meter of air averaged during an eight-hour work shift. Employers are now required to control employee exposure to the substance by:

- Wetting down work operations or using local exhaust ventilation (such as vacuums) to keep silica-containing dust out of the air and out of workers' lungs. Another control method that may work well is enclosing an operation ("process isolation").
- Using respirators when applicable—however, respirators are only allowed when engineering and work practice controls cannot maintain exposures at or below the PEL.
- Wetting down dust before sweeping it up or using the manufacturer's water flow rate when using a tool with water controls.

### Protect yourself

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is required for employees who work with hazardous materials and is one way they can protect themselves from the dangers of silica dust. While these new OSHA regulations significantly decrease silica dust exposure, they do not eliminate exposure altogether. Respirators can significantly lower health risks. Employers and employees, together, should review all of the available respirator options to determine which offers the most protection while not inhibiting the work. Depending on the project at hand, your PPE needs can vary. Employers should not only provide but also enforce the use of PPE to ensure jobsite safety and employee well-being.

### Let's get compliant!

Staying compliant with these new standards may seem like a headache at first—however, they are immensely important to the sustainability of your operation. Not only does it protect your valuable skilled workers, but it also saves your business from steep fines as well.

OSHA understands that most employers want to protect their employees and keep them healthy. In order to ease the transition to the new standards, OSHA has developed some compliance assistance resources for silica. [Click here](#) for more information on those resources.