

Avoiding the 10 Most Common PPE Errors in the Canadian Workplace



Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is a cornerstone of workplace safety in Canada. However, even the best-intentioned organizations often make critical mistakes that undermine the effectiveness of their PPE programs. These oversights not only endanger employee well-being but can also lead to significant legal, financial, and reputational consequences. In this article, we will outline the 10 most common PPE-related errors in Canada, based on reported near-miss data, regulatory fines, cases, and workplace fatality investigations.

A Tragic Reminder: When PPE Errors Turn Fatal

In 2017, a 23-year-old worker at a chemical processing facility near Toronto lost his life in a preventable incident. While transferring a corrosive solution between tanks, the worker's protective gloves and apron—both of which were not rated for the chemicals in question—failed under exposure to the substance. He sustained severe chemical burns and, despite emergency medical intervention, did not survive.

Subsequent investigation by Ontario's Ministry of Labour revealed that the PPE provided to the worker did not meet the CSA standards required for handling highly corrosive chemicals. The company faced significant fines and was ordered to overhaul its entire PPE program. In an emotional statement

to the press, the worker's father spoke about his son's enthusiasm for his job and his trust that the equipment provided by his employer would keep him safe.

A single error in PPE selection led to an unnecessary death and a life unfinished, but also irreversibly affected families and communities while highlighting the dire responsibility organizations hold in protecting their people.

10 COMMON MISTAKES

1. Failing to Properly Assess Hazards

Common Pitfall

One of the most frequent oversights is not conducting a thorough hazard assessment before selecting PPE. Organizations sometimes rely on generic or outdated risk assessments, resulting in suboptimal or even inappropriate PPE for specific job tasks.

Consequences

- Employees may be exposed to risks that the PPE fails to mitigate.
- Organizations can face legal liabilities for failing to provide adequate protection.

Example

A 2019 hazard assessment at a British Columbia construction site missed key points about airborne silica dust from grinding operations. Workers were given dust masks instead of respirators rated for silica exposure. Two workers later reported respiratory issues, and the company was issued a warning by WorkSafeBC. Although no monetary fine was imposed, the incident underscores the importance of accurate, detailed hazard assessments.

2. Providing Substandard or Incompatible PPE

Common Pitfall

Opting for cheaper, substandard PPE or using various brands of components (e.g., respirators and cartridges) without ensuring compatibility can lead to significant safety gaps.

Consequences

- Equipment may not meet CSA (Canadian Standards Association) standards.
- High risk of equipment malfunction, resulting in potential injuries.

Incident

In 2021, an Ontario metal fabrication shop was fined **\$40,000** under the Occupational Health and Safety Act after a worker was injured by sparks that penetrated a low-quality welding mask. The shop admitted they purchased a non-CSA-certified mask from an overseas supplier to reduce costs.

3. Inadequate Training and Education

Common Pitfall

Even high-quality PPE is ineffective if employees do not understand how and when to use it. Inadequate training often leads to inconsistent use, incorrect fit, and improper maintenance.

Consequences

- Misuse or neglect of essential protective equipment.
- Increased likelihood of avoidable injuries or near-misses.

Statistics

According to the **Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and**

Safety (CCOHS), inadequate or improper use of PPE contributes to nearly 10% of reported lost-time injuries related to contact with harmful substances or environments. Proper training and refresher sessions are key preventive measures.

4. Inconsistent Enforcement and Monitoring

Common Pitfall

A company may have solid PPE policies, but if supervisors fail to enforce them consistently, employees may ignore requirements—especially if they feel they can “get away with it.”

Consequences

- Erosion of a safety culture, leading to widespread non-compliance.
- Greater susceptibility to injuries and potential legal action when an incident occurs.

Incident

A municipal water treatment plant in Alberta was penalized **\$30,000** in 2022 for failing to enforce PPE use. Over time, employees stopped wearing protective gloves when handling chemicals. Multiple skin irritation cases were reported, and an inspection revealed management had not enforced existing PPE rules.

5. Improper Storage and Maintenance

Common Pitfall

Storing protective eyewear in dusty drawers, leaving respirators in high-humidity areas, or failing to regularly inspect and clean hearing protection can quickly degrade PPE. Damaged or compromised equipment is essentially no PPE at all.

Consequences

- Reduced PPE lifespan and effectiveness.
- Health issues from contaminated or faulty protective gear (e.g., mold in respirator cartridges).

Preventive Measures

- Implement clear storage protocols (e.g., sealed, labelled bins for respirators).
- Schedule routine inspections and cleaning sessions.
- Assign ownership or accountability for PPE upkeep in each department.

6. Overlooking the Need for Proper Fit and Comfort

Common Pitfall

Even if PPE is correctly selected for a particular hazard, it may not fit every individual properly. Items like respirators, helmets, and harnesses require precise fitting. Overlooking differences in body types, facial structures, and comfort can render PPE unusable or ineffective.

Consequences

- Reduced use or compliance due to discomfort.
- Gaps in protection (e.g., respirator leakage) leading to exposure.

Statistics

The **Association of Workers' Compensation Boards of Canada (AWCBC)** has noted that **approximately 25% of workplace injury reports involving chemical inhalation identified improperly fitted respirators** as a contributing factor. Proper fit-testing—especially for respirators—remains an essential step in PPE programs.

7. Not Replacing PPE at Appropriate Intervals

Common Pitfall

Helmets, safety shoes, and gloves all have recommended lifespans. Stretching their use “just a bit longer” can lead to undetected cracking, deterioration, or compromised materials.

Consequences

- Sudden failures under normal working conditions.
- Legal risks if the PPE is beyond its certified life and an injury occurs.

Example

In Québec, a roofing company was cited by the Commission des normes, de l'équité, de la santé et de la sécurité du travail (CNESST) in 2020 for having employees use harnesses that were past their recommended lifespan. While no fine was levied due to immediate corrective action, the warning underscored the importance of tracking PPE expiration and wear.

8. Lack of Clear Accountability and Leadership

Common Pitfall

If PPE compliance is seen as an individual worker's responsibility alone, organizations risk a disconnect between management directives and front-line practices. A successful safety culture requires strong leadership and shared accountability.

Consequences

- Incomplete buy-in from employees.
- Confusion about who is responsible for enforcement, training, and PPE maintenance.

Incident

A **Toronto-based construction firm** was fined **\$55,000** in 2020 after a worker sustained an eye injury due to not wearing proper goggles on site. The court found that supervisory staff had turned a blind eye to non-compliance, indicating a breakdown of accountability from top to bottom.

9. Ignoring Technological Advancements and Innovation

Common Pitfall

Some organizations rely on outdated equipment or fail to explore advancements in PPE technology (e.g., smart helmets with integrated sensors, advanced cut-resistant gloves, hearing protection with monitoring capabilities).

Consequences

- Missed opportunities to enhance safety and streamline compliance.
- Potential for higher injury rates and compensation costs due to reliance on older or less-effective gear.

Statistics

The **Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB)** has indicated that **use of advanced protective gear (e.g., high-visibility, temperature-adaptable fabrics)** has been linked to a **14% reduction in certain types of injuries**—demonstrating that adopting new technologies can offer tangible benefits.

10. Neglecting Regular Audits and Continuous Improvement

Common Pitfall

PPE programs must evolve with new work processes, emerging hazards, and updated regulations. Failing to conduct regular audits or relying on outdated policies can cause organizations

to lag behind current best practices.

Consequences

- Missed updates to legislation, such as changes to CSA standards for high-visibility apparel or hearing protection requirements.
- Complacency that can breed new safety risks as work conditions change.

Incident

A large warehouse in Saskatchewan underwent a random Ministry of Labour Relations and Workplace Safety inspection in 2022. Inspectors found that employees working near forklift traffic lacked mandatory reflective vests, even though new provincial regulations required them. The company faced a **\$25,000** fine and was mandated to update its internal PPE policy.

Practical Steps to Enhance Your PPE Program

A robust PPE program goes beyond simply purchasing equipment and hoping workers use it correctly. It requires thoughtful planning, proactive management, and continual refinement. In light of the tragedies and fines detailed above, it's evident that preventing PPE errors demands an integrated approach—one that starts at the executive level and extends through every layer of an organization. Here are some concrete steps to reinforce and improve your PPE initiatives:

1. Conduct Regular Hazard Assessments

- Involve cross-functional teams—operations, safety, HR, and external specialists—to pinpoint unique risks.
- Update assessments whenever there are significant operational changes or new hazards are identified.

2. Invest in Quality, Certified Equipment

- Ensure all PPE is CSA-approved and that each item

is suitable for the hazards at hand.

- Verify compatibility among various PPE items (e.g., respirators and cartridges from the same manufacturer).

3. Implement Comprehensive Training

- Provide initial and refresher training that covers correct fit, usage, and maintenance.
- Use real-life scenarios or hands-on demonstrations to make the training engaging and relatable.

4. Establish Clear Accountability

- Assign specific roles (supervisors, managers, safety teams) for monitoring PPE usage and maintenance.
- Create transparent reporting mechanisms so workers feel supported when voicing PPE concerns.

5. Perform Routine Inspections and Audits

- Schedule regular checks of both the condition of the PPE and adherence to established policies.
- Align your internal guidelines with the latest Canadian regulations and industry best practices.

6. Encourage Employee Feedback

- Engage workers through safety committees, suggestion systems, or regular debrief meetings.
- Address comfort or fit issues promptly—discomfort often leads to non-compliance.

7. Stay Current with Technological Trends

- Continuously evaluate emerging PPE technologies that may offer better protection or ease of use.
- Pilot new solutions on a smaller scale before deciding on a broader rollout.

8. Plan for Lifecycle Replacement

- Track each item's service life, including helmets, respirators, gloves, and harnesses.
- Replace gear before it shows signs of wear or reaches the end of its recommended lifespan.

9. Document Everything

- Maintain clear records of PPE issuance, training

attendance, inspections, and maintenance activities.

- Good documentation demonstrates due diligence and can be critical in the event of an incident investigation.

10. Foster a Safety Culture

- Communicate the importance of PPE from the top down—executives and managers should be visible champions of safety.
- Recognize and reward compliance, turning PPE adherence into a positive, team-building practice rather than a forced requirement.

Conclusion

Ensuring that a workplace's PPE program is robust, up-to-date, and effectively implemented can significantly reduce injury rates, compensation claims, and organizational liability. Many of the most common errors—ranging from inadequate hazard assessments to neglecting regular equipment audits—are entirely preventable with the right strategies and a commitment to continuous improvement. By learning from real-world cases, fines, and Canadian statistics, safety managers, directors, and executives can refine their PPE practices and safeguard the health and productivity of their workforce.

Remember: Effective PPE management is not a static process. It requires ongoing vigilance, leadership, and a genuine commitment to worker well-being. When embraced as part of a broader safety culture, PPE becomes more than just equipment—it becomes a core element of an organization's responsibility to its people.