

# Is It OK to Let Workers Remove Required Respirators During a Heat Wave?



OHS laws specify the kinds of safety measures employers must use to protect workers against particular hazards, such as fall protection systems for workers who perform operations from a surface or location that's 3 metres or more above ground. But there's a big exception: You don't have to implement otherwise required safety measures that would themselves pose danger to workers. The scenario and quiz below show how these principles may play out in real life.

## Situation

The record heat wave has reached its third day with temperatures reaching 37° C/100° F. Your workers are about to enter a storage bin to perform cleaning operations. Because the bin is a confined space and the air inside contains high concentrations of a hazardous chemical, respirators are required under your province's OHS laws. However, wearing a heavy respirator in these thermal conditions would expose the work crew to high risk of heat stress. Your dilemma comes to a head when the workers refuse to enter the space unless they can remove their respirators.

# Question

## What should you do?

1. Let the workers remove their respirators just this once to protect against heat stress.
2. Make them wear respirators because the respiratory hazards outweigh the heat stress hazards.
3. Put off the operation until the weather cools.
4. Let them do the operation with respirators that provide less protection than OHS laws require but are lighter in weight.

# Answer

1. **You must postpone the operation until you can adequately protect the workers against both the respiratory and heat stress hazards.**

# Explanation

The cardinal rule of OHS compliance is to protect workers against **all hazards** and not trade one form of protection for another. There's no way to follow that rule in this situation. Letting workers enter the storage bin without the necessary respirator would expose them to atmospheric hazards inside the space; but making them wear the respirators they need to guard against those hazards will expose them to hazards of heat stress. Since protecting against both hazards at the same time is impossible under heat wave conditions, your only option is to postpone the operation until the heat things cool off. So, C is the right answer.

# Why Wrong Answers Are Wrong

**A is wrong** because it's never permissible to let workers enter a confined space containing a hazardous atmosphere without

respiratory protective equipment, even if it's just a one-time exception to deal with unusual circumstances like heat wave conditions.

**B is wrong** because you're not allowed to choose between hazards. The OHS laws require you to protect against **all hazards** rather than determine which hazard "outweighs" the other.

**D is wrong** because it specifically says that the lightweight respirators don't provide the protection required by OHS laws. However, this would be a viable option if there actually was a lightweight substitute available that would provide respiratory protection at least equivalent to the heavy respirators without exposing workers to heat stress hazards.