

PPE SELECTION, USE & COMPLIANCE

A Supervisor's Safety Guide | RK SAFETY Workplace Safety Series

This is Guide 5 of 5 in the RK SAFETY Workplace Safety Series — download the full series at <https://rksafety.co.za/safety-resources/>

Why This Risk Matters

Personal Protective Equipment is the last line of defence between a worker and a hazard. When engineering controls and administrative measures have been applied, PPE stands as the final barrier against injury, illness, or death. Yet in South African workplaces, PPE compliance remains a persistent challenge — equipment is issued but not worn, worn incorrectly, poorly fitted, or simply never replaced once damaged.

The consequences are immediate and physical: a worker without safety glasses suffers a life-altering eye injury from a flying chip of metal. A worker wearing the wrong gloves loses fingers to a chemical burn. A worker with a poorly fitted respirator develops occupational lung disease over a decade of silent exposure. These are not abstract risks — they are the daily reality of workplaces where PPE is treated as a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine protective measure.

Research published in 2025 studying high-risk workers in the South African informal sector found that 47.5% had received no formal safety training — and that this directly correlated with inconsistent and incorrect PPE use. (Source: Mashimbyi et al., Assessing Occupational Safety Risks and Challenges Among Informal Welders in Pretoria West, South Africa, PubMed, 2025.) While this study focused on informal sector welders specifically, it mirrors a pattern that experienced HSE managers will recognise across formal construction, warehousing, and manufacturing environments: when training is absent or superficial, PPE compliance collapses. The equipment sits in the storeroom. The injury happens on the floor.

Most Common Causes of PPE-Related Incidents

- **Incorrect PPE selected for the hazard** — especially with respiratory and chemical protection
- Workers not trained in how to correctly fit, use, and maintain PPE
- **Damaged or expired PPE not replaced** — especially helmets, harnesses, and respirators
- Supervisors failing to enforce PPE use consistently and visibly
- **PPE not readily available at the point of task** — workers skip it for convenience
- Comfort and fit complaints addressed with relaxed standards rather than better-fitting alternatives
- **PPE procured on price alone** — non-compliant equipment that carries no genuine protection
- No system for tracking PPE issue, condition, and replacement

What South African Law Requires

PPE obligations are set out in the OHS Act and multiple subsidiary regulations:

- Section 8 of the OHS Act requires employers to provide and maintain PPE that is safe and without risk to health, at no cost to the worker.
- The General Safety Regulations (Regulation 2) require PPE to be used wherever hazards cannot be controlled by other means, and that all PPE comply with applicable SANS standards.
- **Specific regulations** — including the HCS Regulations, Construction Regulations, and Noise-Induced Hearing Loss Regulations — prescribe PPE requirements for specific hazards and environments.
- Workers have a corresponding duty under Section 14 of the OHS Act to use PPE correctly and to report any defects immediately.
- **PPE must carry SABS/SANS approval marks where applicable. Procuring non-compliant PPE is not only a safety failure** — it exposes the employer to liability.

Step-by-Step Prevention Checklist

- 1. Conduct a PPE needs assessment based on risk** — Match PPE to identified hazards, not to habit or what is cheapest. Use your risk assessments as the basis for specifying the correct PPE for each task.
- 2. Procure SANS-compliant PPE from reputable suppliers** — Specify SANS standards when ordering. Avoid counterfeit or substandard equipment — the price difference is meaningless against the cost of a preventable injury.
- 3. Ensure correct fit for every worker** — A harness that does not fit is worse than useless. A helmet that is too large will not protect against an impact. Conduct individual fitting for all PPE, especially harnesses, respirators, and hearing protection.
- 4. Train workers on PPE use before deployment** — Training must cover how to don and doff correctly, how to conduct a pre-use inspection, limitations of the PPE, and what to do when PPE is damaged or not available.
- 5. Implement a PPE inspection and replacement schedule** — Establish clear criteria for when PPE must be replaced. Harnesses and helmets must be replaced after any impact event, regardless of visible damage.
- 6. Make PPE accessible at the point of task** — If a worker has to walk across the site to collect PPE, they will skip it under time pressure. Store PPE where work happens.
- 7. Enforce PPE compliance consistently and visibly** — Supervisors must lead by example. Inconsistent enforcement destroys compliance culture. Non-compliance must be addressed immediately through a clearly communicated disciplinary process.
- 8. Maintain a PPE register** — Record who has been issued what, when, in what condition, and when it is due for replacement. This is both a compliance requirement and a practical management tool.
- 9. Address comfort and fit complaints seriously** — Worker resistance to PPE is often legitimate. Investigate complaints, trial alternatives, and involve workers in selecting comfortable, well-fitting options. Compliance follows comfort.
- 10. Conduct regular PPE audits** — Walk the floor. Observe actual PPE use during tasks. Audit does not mean checking the register — it means seeing what is actually happening on the ground and correcting what you find.

KEY TAKEAWAY: *PPE is not a formality — it is the physical expression of your duty of care to the people who work for you. A PPE programme that works is one where every worker understands why they are wearing what they are wearing, trusts that it will protect them, and has the training and the supervision to use it correctly every time. That is not bureaucracy. That is what the safe way forward looks like in practice.*

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