

Protective Equipment Quiz



Forcing Employees to Wear Protective Equipment in Sweltering Conditions

SITUATION

The July heat wave has reached its third day with temperatures at a balmy 37° C (100° F). Your employees are about to enter a storage bin to perform cleaning operations. The bin is a confined space and the air inside contains high concentrations of a hazardous chemical; so respirators are an absolute must. Normally, that's not a problem. But wearing a heavy respirator in this hot weather puts the work crew at high risk of heat stress. So employees refuse to enter the space unless they can remove their respirators.

QUESTION

What should you do?

- A) Let them remove their respirators just this once to avoid heat stress
- B) Make them wear respirators because the hazardous chemicals in the air pose the more immediate risk
- C) Put off the operation until the weather cools
- D) Let them do the operation without respirators but in short work/rest cycles

ANSWER

C. Of these three, postponing the operation is the only viable option.

EXPLANATION:

You can't let employees enter a confined space containing a hazardous atmosphere without a respirator; but you can't pooh-pooh the heat stress dangers either. To the extent it puts workers at "high risk" of heat stress, requiring them to use respirators isn't a viable option.

The only way out of this dilemma is to find a way to conduct the operation that enables the employees to do the job using respirators but doesn't expose them to heat stress. One Postponing the operation until the weather cools is one possibility. And while it's not the only possibility, it's the only one of the listed options that doesn't require trading protection against one hazard for protection against another. So C is the right answer.

WHY WRONG ANSWERS ARE WRONG

A is wrong because letting workers enter a confined space with a poisonous atmosphere is not only illegal but insane—unless your intent is to kill or seriously harm them.

B is wrong because use of respirators puts employees in danger of heat stress. And since the operation can't be done *without* a respirator, the challenge is to make it possible for the crew to do the job in respirators without falling prey to heat stress.

D is wrong because it allows for the work to be done without a respirator. But change the phrase "without respirators" to "with respirators," and it might be a viable option.

Go to the Health and Safety Topic Page for More on Heat Stress and Other Work Hazards