

Preventing Tomorrow's Occupational Lung Disease Starts Today

2 hours ago



The relaunch of the British Safety Industry Federation's Clean Air? Take Care! campaign comes at an important time for occupational health, explains John Hooker, Chief Executive Officer at the British Safety Industry Federation.

Despite significant advances in workplace safety, occupational respiratory disease remains one of the UK's greatest causes of work-related ill health. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) estimates that [around 11,000 people die each year from occupational lung disease](#) linked to past workplace exposures, while around 22,000 workers develop breathing or lung problems caused or made worse by work annually.

While asbestos continues to account for many of these deaths, today's workforce faces a new generation of respiratory hazards. Respirable crystalline silica (RCS), generated during activities such as cutting concrete, drilling masonry, quarrying, tunnelling and working with engineered stone, is now recognised by HSE as one of the most significant respiratory risks facing the construction industry. Exposure to silica dust can lead to silicosis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and lung cancer, yet the dust itself is often invisible, making it easy to underestimate the danger.

The challenge is that many occupational respiratory diseases have latency periods measured in decades. The statistics we see today often reflect exposures that occurred many years ago, meaning the impact of the decisions we make today may not become fully apparent for a generation. That makes continuous improvement essential. Every step taken to improve awareness, competence and communication has the potential to reduce future disease.

Making respiratory protection count

For BSIF, the priority has always been helping employers and wearers ensure that when respiratory protective equipment (RPE) is required, it delivers the protection it is designed to provide.

Modern respirators are capable of providing exceptionally high levels of protection, but only when they are appropriate for the hazard, fit the wearer correctly and are used as intended. Too often, failures in respiratory protection are not caused by the product itself, but by inappropriate product selection, poor face fit, inadequate training or incorrect use.

Helping employers understand these requirements, and giving wearers the confidence to use RPE correctly, has been central to BSIF's work for many years. That philosophy underpins the refreshed *Clean Air? Take Care!* campaign.

Originally launched 15 years ago, the campaign was created to promote good practice in respiratory protection. Its core message remains as relevant today as it was then: selecting the right equipment is only the first step. Ensuring it is correctly fitted, properly maintained and used correctly is what ultimately protects workers from hazardous airborne contaminants.

Reaching people where they work

The latest refresh of *Clean Air? Take Care!* recognises that while the principles of respiratory protection remain the same, the way people access information has changed.

Health and safety information is becoming increasingly digital, and rightly so. Online resources are easier to update, can provide greater depth and are available whenever they are needed. However, in the drive to digitalise, we should not lose sight of the value of well-designed printed guidance.

Many of the people who rely on respiratory protection every day work on construction sites, in workshops, factories and engineering environments. They are focused on the job in hand rather than sitting behind a desk. For them, simple, visual guidance that can be kept in a pocket, toolbox or site office remain an effective way of reinforcing key messages at the point of use.

That thinking influenced the development of the campaign's new printed guide. It distils the essential principles of respiratory protection into an easy-to-follow visual format that workers can refer to quickly throughout the working day. QR codes then provide direct access to more detailed online guidance for those who want to explore specific topics in greater depth.

The aim is simple: get the right information into the hands of the people who need it, at the moment they need it.

Supporting better decisions

Providing practical guidance is only one part of helping employers improve respiratory protection.

Through its [Duty Holder Membership scheme](#), BSIF supports employers, health and safety professionals, procurement specialists and others with responsibility for selecting and managing PPE. Members have access to expert advice, technical guidance, webinars, qualifications and the BSIF PPE Helpline, helping them navigate changing legislation, understand relevant standards and make informed decisions about protecting their workforce.

This sits alongside BSIF's wider work to raise occupational health and safety standards across industry. The [Fit2Fit accreditation scheme](#) has helped establish competence in face fit testing as an integral part of effective respiratory protection and is now attracting growing international interest. BSIF's collaboration with HSE on the updated FaceFit Respirator Demonstrator (FFRED) video has also provided employers and wearers with a practical demonstration of why achieving an effective face seal is fundamental to respiratory protection.

Although each initiative addresses a different aspect of respiratory protection, they all share the same objective which is to improve understanding, increase competence and help employers ensure that respiratory protective equipment performs as intended.

Investing in the future

The UK has developed an international reputation for its approach to respiratory protection through collaboration between regulators, manufacturers, distributors and safety professionals. Maintaining that position depends on continuing to share knowledge, improve competence and provide practical support for those responsible for protecting workers.

Whether the risk comes from silica dust, welding fume, wood dust or other hazardous airborne contaminants, the objective remains the same: ensuring every worker who relies on respiratory protective equipment has the right product, correctly selected, correctly fitted and used correctly.

Occupational respiratory disease remains one of the UK's most significant workplace health challenges, but it is also one of the most preventable. The statistics that demonstrate the success of today's efforts may not be available for many years. That should never prevent us from acting today.

Every employer who strengthens their respiratory protection programme, every duty holder who is better equipped to make informed decisions and every worker who understands how to protect themselves contributes to healthier working lives for future generations.

That is the ambition behind the refreshed *Clean Air? Take Care!* campaign, and it continues to drive BSIF's commitment to improving respiratory protection across the UK.

For the full *Clean Air? Take Care!* Campaign, see: bsif.co.uk/campaigns-projects/clean-air-take-care/