

OSHA Rules on Hard Hat Expiration

Hard hats, an important piece of resilient personal protective equipment (PPE), are required by OSHA in many work environments. To be OSHA compliant, a hard hat must meet ANSI Z89.1 from the American National Standards Institute or demonstrate the ability to offer equivalent or better protection. Specific guidelines exist as to when to replace a hard hat and why workers must adhere to the rule to protect themselves.

OSHA Standards Regarding Hard Hats

OSHA has two standards governing hard hat requirements, both in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Title 29. Code 29 CFR 1910.135 refers to head protection requirements for general industry workers, and 29 CFR 1926.100 governs hard hat requirements for workers in construction, demolition and renovation. In general, both standards require hard hats when the potential exists for injury to the head from falling objects, from striking the head against fixed objects like beams or pipes, or from contact with electrical hazards.

Hard Hat Expiration

As an important piece of safety equipment, hard hats must be worn and stored properly and replaced regularly, or when the hard hat shows signs of damage or wear. While OSHA does not state a specific number of years or a date recommended for the PPE's life, OSHA rules for hard hat expiration are based on ANSI guidelines, which advise an adherence to the manufacturer's instructions regarding service life.

To aid in determining a hard hat's expiration date, manufacturers permanently print the hard hat's date of manufacture in the shell of the hat, generally on the inside near the edge. The date stamp may have a number in the middle indicating the year of manufacture and an arrow pointing to the month. In addition, workers are recommended to record the date the hat was placed into service.

General Guidelines for Replacement

Generally, the guideline is that a hard hat should be replaced no more than five years after its manufacture date, even if it was never put into service. This is because hard hats are made from plastic, which degrades over time even in ideal conditions. Any wear or distortion of the hat may compromise its ability to protect the head from impact or electricity.

Even if a hat was never worn, if it was manufactured more than four or five years prior, it should be replaced. If the hat is worn in the sun for long hours or in hostile environments with chemicals in high temperatures, it may need to be replaced sooner, perhaps after two years.

If they suffer an impact, hard hats also should be replaced immediately, even if the hat doesn't appear damaged. The integrity of the hard hat may have been affected by the impact.

Hard Hat Suspension Replacement

The suspension inside the hat should be replaced every 12 months. Hard hat manufacturers test the two primary components, the shell and the suspension, as a unit, so the integrity of a hard hat and its ability to protect the head from damage rely on having the correct, matching suspension from the same manufacturer as the shell.

Hard Hat Damage Inspection

Workers should inspect hard hats before every use for signs of wear or damage. Hard hat wearers also should check the shell for fading, chalkiness, crazing or decreased flexibility (flex the brim to check for "give" and any unusual noises like creaking or popping), since these are signs of aging plastic. Next, workers should inspect the shell for dents, scrapes, gouges, holes and cracks, and inspect the suspension for fraying, tears and cracks in both the fabric and plastic components.

Storage and Maintenance

According to OSHA rules, it's important that wearers store hard hats away from excessive heat or cold, corrosive chemicals and direct sunlight. For example, it is not advised that workers store a hard hat on the dashboard of a car where it will be exposed to the sun.

In addition, it is not recommended that hard hat wearers expose their hat to paints or adhesives. These may interfere with the hat's ability to protect its wearer from electrical shocks, and they also could hide signs of wear and damage. To clean a hard hat, an owner should use water and mild soap; harsher cleaning products may damage the plastic and fabric. Workers should replace their hat should if tar or other substances cannot be cleaned off it.