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ARC FLASH
A guide to workwear safety

1. INTRODUCTION TO ARC FLASH

An Arc Flash is one of the most dangerous hazards that can occur in an electrical environment, posing severe risks to life. It occurs when an electrical discharge travels through the air, creating a highly dangerous and intense burst of energy. This energy is capable of causing catastrophic injuries, including severe burns, hearing loss, blindness, and even fatalities. The consequences of an Arc Flash can be immediate and devastating, which makes understanding and mitigating this risk a critical priority for industries that work with or around high and low-voltage electrical systems.

Arc Flash incidents are not rare occurrences. They can happen in a wide variety of industries, from power generation and distribution to industrial manufacturing and construction. Despite their frequency and the severe damage they can cause, Arc Flash incidents are often underreported, partly because they are categorised under general electrical incidents in safety statistics. This lack of specific reporting can lead to a dangerous underestimation of the risk, resulting in inadequate protective measures.

The intense energy released during an Arc Flash event can reach temperatures as high as 35,000°F (19,426°C), which is hotter than the surface of the sun. This energy can vaporize metal, ignite clothing, and produce a shockwave capable of throwing workers across a room. Additionally, the bright light produced by the flash can cause temporary or permanent blindness. The potential for such severe outcomes underscores the importance of implementing comprehensive Arc Flash protection strategies.

Industries that face these risks must prioritise Arc Flash protection as part of their overall safety programs. This involves not only understanding the conditions under which Arc Flashes occur but also ensuring that workers are equipped with the right protective gear and are trained to recognize and mitigate these risks.



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2. THE SCIENCE BEHIND ARC FLASH

Arc Flash incidents are a result of an electrical fault that allows electric current to travel through the air between conductors or from a conductor to the ground. The conditions that lead to an Arc Flash can be varied, including equipment failure, accidental contact with energized components, or even improper maintenance practices. Understanding the science behind Arc Flash is essential for identifying potential hazards and implementing effective protection strategies.

At its core, an Arc Flash is caused by a rapid release of electrical energy. When a fault occurs, a large amount of current passes through ionized air, creating a highly conductive plasma. This plasma can sustain the arc and allow it to continue discharging energy until the fault is cleared or the energy source is interrupted. The amount of energy released during an Arc Flash event is influenced by several factors, including the voltage level, the amount of fault current available, the duration of the arc, and the distance between conductors.

The energy released during an Arc Flash can manifest in several forms:

Thermal energy: The most immediate danger from an Arc Flash is the extreme heat generated, which can cause severe burns to anyone within close proximity. The temperatures can be high enough to ignite clothing and cause third-degree burns, even at a distance.

Pressure wave: The rapid expansion of air caused by the intense heat creates a pressure wave that can exert forces strong enough to throw workers, damage equipment, and cause physical injuries.

Sound blast: The pressure wave is often accompanied by a loud noise, which can reach levels that cause hearing damage or rupture eardrums.

Light flash: The bright light produced by the arc can cause temporary or permanent damage to the eyes, including blindness.

Understanding these dangers is crucial for assessing the risks associated with Arc Flash and implementing the appropriate protective measures. This includes conducting thorough risk assessments, selecting the proper personal protective equipment (PPE), and ensuring that workers are adequately trained to recognize and respond to potential Arc Flash hazards.

3. WHY ARC FLASH PROTECTION IS NECESSARY

Arc Flash protection is essential to safeguard workers from the potentially lethal consequences of an Arc Flash incident. The extreme energy released during an Arc Flash can lead to catastrophic injuries, including severe burns, hearing damage, and permanent blindness, in addition to causing fatal accidents. Beyond the immediate physical dangers, Arc Flash incidents can also result in significant secondary effects such as fires, equipment damage, and costly downtime for businesses.

The necessity of Arc Flash protection is underscored by the severe temperatures and forces generated during these incidents. With temperatures reaching up to 35,000°F (19,426°C), even brief exposure can result in severe burns. The pressure wave generated by the rapid expansion of superheated air can exert thousands of pounds of force, enough to throw workers off their feet and cause serious injury or death. The bright light produced by the flash, which includes intense ultraviolet radiation, can cause eye injuries, ranging from temporary blindness to permanent damage.

Moreover, the prevalence of Arc Flash incidents in various industries highlights the importance of protection. Industries such as power generation, utilities, manufacturing, and railways are particularly vulnerable due to the nature of their operations, which often involves working with or near high and low-voltage electrical systems. These industries cannot afford to overlook the risks posed by Arc Flash, as doing so could result in severe injuries, fatalities, and substantial financial losses due to downtime and equipment damage.

Therefore, implementing comprehensive Arc Flash protection is not just a regulatory requirement but a critical measure for ensuring the safety of workers and the continuity of operations. This includes providing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE), conducting regular risk assessments, and educating workers on safe work practices to prevent Arc Flash incidents.



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4. TYPICAL AREAS WHERE ARC FLASH IS A RISK

Arc Flash incidents can occur in various environments where electrical energy is present, posing a significant risk to workers. Some of the typical areas where Arc Flash risks are prevalent include:

Power generation facilities

Workers in power plants, both nuclear and fossil-fuel-based, are at constant risk of Arc Flash incidents due to the high voltages and electrical equipment used.

Utilities

Utility workers, especially those involved in maintenance and repair of electrical grids, underground cables, and substations, are frequently exposed to Arc Flash hazards.

Industrial electrical maintenance

Industrial sites, such as manufacturing plants and chemical processing facilities, often involve complex electrical systems where Arc Flash risks are present during routine maintenanc or emergency repairs.

Rail and transportation

Workers in the rail industry who maintain electrical systems, including overhead lines and trackside equipment, are at risk, particularly during installation, testing, or repair activities.

Construction sites

Construction workers, especially those involved in breaking ground or operating near live electrical lines, face significant Arc Flash risks due to accidental contact with underground or overhead electrical cables.

Data centres

High-density electrical installations in data centres, where multiple power sources and backups are integrated, can be potential sites for Arc Flash incidents if proper precautions are not followed.

Renewable energy sites

Wind farms, solar power installations, and other renewable energy facilities involve high-voltage systems that can pose Arc Flash hazards, particularly during maintenance or system upgrades.

Battery EV manufacture

The production and maintenance of electric vehicle (EV) batteries involve high-voltage systems that can lead to Arc Flash incidents, making proper protection and safety procedures critical.



5. TERMINOLOGY EXPLAINED

Understanding the terminology related to Arc Flash protection is essential for selecting the right PPE and ensuring safety:

CAL/cm^2: This is the unit of measurement used to quantify the incident energy of an Arc Flash. It stands for calories per square centimeter and indicates the amount of heat energy that a garment can withstand before the wearer is at risk of a second-degree burn.

ATPV (arc thermal performance value): ATPV is the maximum incident energy that a garment can resist before there is a 50% probability of the wearer sustaining a second-degree burn. It's a critical rating for determining the protective capabilities of Arc Flash PPE.

EBT (energy breakopen threshold): EBT measures the incident energy at which a material is likely to break open and expose the skin. It's another critical value in assessing the safety of Arc Flash garments.

ELIM (incident energy limit): ELIM represents the maximum incident energy level at which the garment can provide protection with 0% probability of causing a second-degree burn. It is a newer measure introduced in the EN 61482-2:2020 standard.

APC (arc protection class): APC is a classification used in the Box Test Method (EN 61482-1-2) and denotes the protection level of a garment against Arc Flash. APC 1 corresponds to a 4kA Arc, while APC 2 corresponds to a 7kA Arc.

6. UNDERSTANDING ARC FLASH PPE

(personal protective equipment)

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is the last line of defence for workers exposed to the risk of Arc Flash. Given the severe nature of Arc Flash incidents, choosing the right PPE is crucial to ensure the safety of employees. Arc Flash PPE is specifically designed to protect workers from the intense heat, light, and pressure waves generated by an Arc Flash, and it must meet stringent standards to be effective.

Arc Flash PPE includes a range of garments and accessories designed to protect different parts of the body:

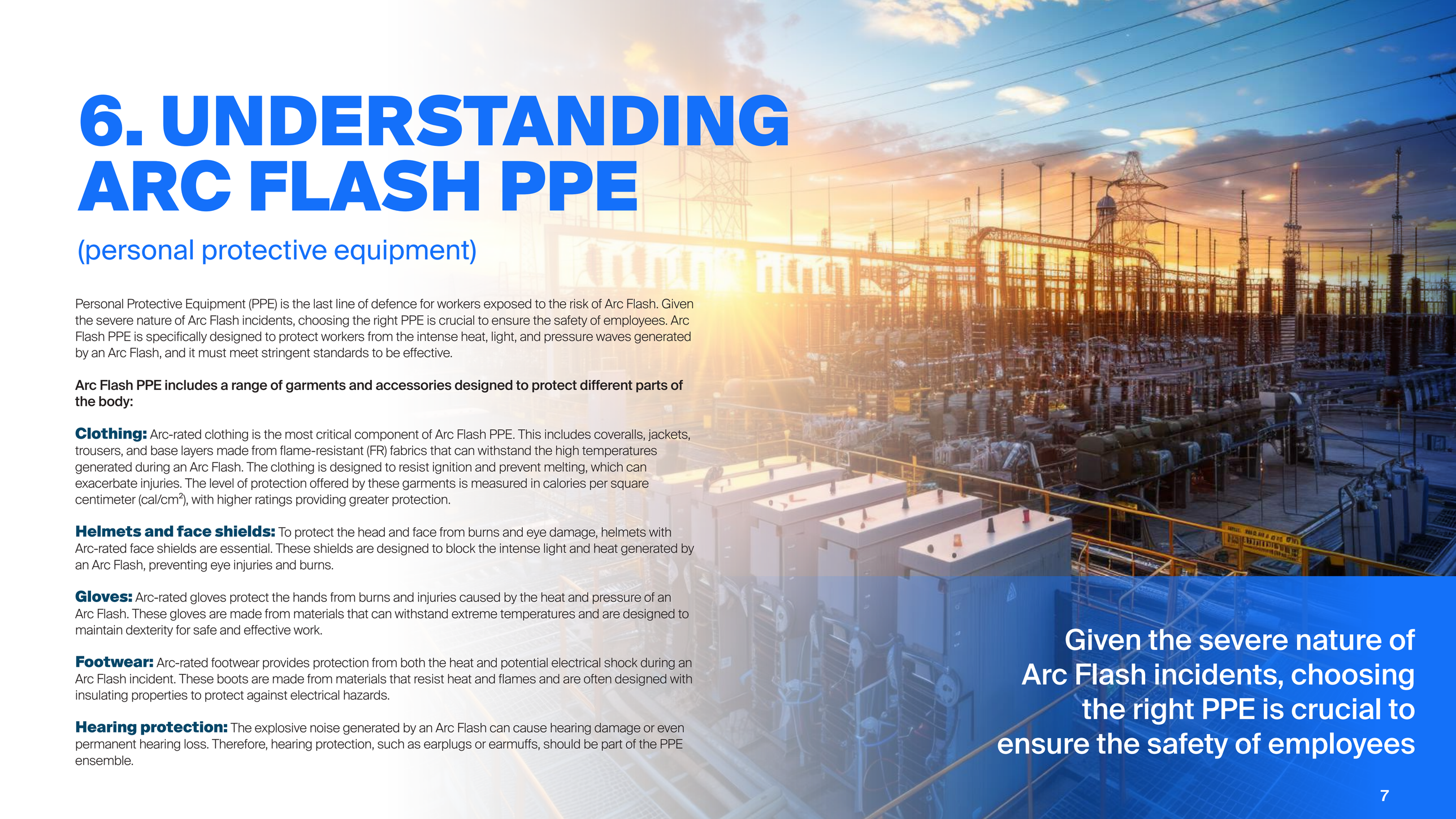
Clothing: Arc-rated clothing is the most critical component of Arc Flash PPE. This includes coveralls, jackets, trousers, and base layers made from flame-resistant (FR) fabrics that can withstand the high temperatures generated during an Arc Flash. The clothing is designed to resist ignition and prevent melting, which can exacerbate injuries. The level of protection offered by these garments is measured in calories per square centimeter (cal/cm^2), with higher ratings providing greater protection.

Helmets and face shields: To protect the head and face from burns and eye damage, helmets with Arc-rated face shields are essential. These shields are designed to block the intense light and heat generated by an Arc Flash, preventing eye injuries and burns.

Gloves: Arc-rated gloves protect the hands from burns and injuries caused by the heat and pressure of an Arc Flash. These gloves are made from materials that can withstand extreme temperatures and are designed to maintain dexterity for safe and effective work.

Footwear: Arc-rated footwear provides protection from both the heat and potential electrical shock during an Arc Flash incident. These boots are made from materials that resist heat and flames and are often designed with insulating properties to protect against electrical hazards.

Hearing protection: The explosive noise generated by an Arc Flash can cause hearing damage or even permanent hearing loss. Therefore, hearing protection, such as earplugs or earmuffs, should be part of the PPE ensemble.



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7. GARMENT TESTING

Arc Flash garments undergo rigorous testing to ensure they provide the necessary protection in the event of an Arc Flash incident. The primary tests include:

Open arc test (EN 61482-1-1):
This test determines the ATPV, EBT, and ELIM values for garments. It simulates an open Arc Flash to assess how much thermal energy the garment can withstand before the wearere is at risk.

Box test (EN 61482-1-2):
In this test, garments are exposed to an Arc within a confined box to simulate a real-world scenario. The test measures the Arc Protection Class (APC) and assesses the garment's ability to protect against a defined level of Arc energy.

8. ARC FLASH MYTHS

There are several misconceptions about Arc Flash and the protective measures needed:

Arc flash only occurs in high voltage systems:

While higher voltages increase the likelihood of severe Arc Flash incidents, they can also occur in low voltage environments especially when conductors are close together or when there's a fault.

Flame-resistant (FR) clothing is enough for arc flash protection:

FR clothing is designed to resist ignition and self-extinguish, but it does not protect against the intense heat and pressure wave of an Arc Flash. Specialised Arc-rated garments are required for true protection.

Only electrical workers need arc flash protection:

Any worker in proximity to live electrical equipment, including those in maintenance, construction, and industrial settings, is at risk of Arc Flash and should wear appropriate PPE.

All arc-rated clothing is the same:

Arc-rated garments come with different protection levels, and it's essential to select the appropriate rating based on the specific risks identified in the workplace.

Standard clothing can be worn under arc-rated PPE:

Wearing non-Arc-rated clothing made from meltable materials, such as polyester, underneath Arc-rated PPE is not permitted. All layers worn should be Arc-rated to provide comprehensive protection.

9. THE ROLE OF ARC FLASH FABRIC

The fabric used in Arc Flash PPE plays a crucial role in protecting the wearer by

Oxygen depletion:

Arc Flash fabrics are designed to remove or significantly reduce the amount of oxygen available to a flame, preventing the fabric from igniting or sustaining a burn.

Thermal barrier:

These fabrics create a barrier that resists the penetration of heat and flames, thereby reducing the risk of burns reaching the wearer's skin. The fabric's structure allows it to char rather than burn, providing a protective layer that shields the skin from direct exposure to high temperatures.

Durability and resilience:

Arc-rated fabrics are engineered to withstand multiple washes and continued exposure to environmental factors without losing their protective properties, ensuring long-term protection for the wearer.

Chemical composition:

The fibres used in Arc Flash fabrics are inherently flame-resistant, meaning their protective qualities are not dependent on chemical treatments that can wear off over time. This ensures consistent performance even after repeated use.

10. STEPS TO IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE ARC FLASH PROTECTION

Implementing effective Arc Flash protection requires a systematic approach that integrates risk assessment, appropriate PPE selection, and ongoing education and training. The following steps outline a comprehensive strategy for safeguarding workers from Arc Flash hazards:

- **Conduct a thorough risk assessment:** The first step in Arc Flash protection is to conduct a detailed risk assessment of the work environment. This involves identifying areas where Arc Flash risks are present, evaluating the likelihood of an incident, and determining the potential severity of an Arc Flash event. Risk assessments should consider factors such as voltage levels, the condition of electrical equipment, and the proximity of workers to potential Arc Flash sources.

- **Calculate incident energy levels:** Based on the risk assessment, the next step is to calculate the incident energy levels that workers might be exposed to during an Arc Flash event. This calculation, typically expressed in calories per square centimeter (cal/cm^2), helps in determining the level of protection required for the PPE. The calculation should take into account factors such as fault current, arc duration, and the distance between the worker and the potential Arc Flash source.

- **Select appropriate PPE:** With the incident energy levels determined, the next step is to select the appropriate PPE that meets or exceeds these energy levels. The PPE should be Arc-rated, and the rating should correspond to the calculated energy levels to ensure sufficient protection. This includes selecting garments, helmets, face shields, gloves, footwear, and hearing protection that are all tested and certified for Arc Flash protection.

- **Ensure proper fit and usage:** Even the best PPE will not provide adequate protection if it does not fit properly or is not used correctly. It's important to ensure that all Arc Flash PPE fits the workers properly and that they are trained on how to wear and use the equipment correctly. Workers should also be educated on the importance of not wearing non-Arc-rated clothing underneath their PPE, as this can compromise the overall protection.

- **Implement maintenance and inspection protocols:** Regular maintenance and inspection of PPE are essential to ensure that it remains effective over time. PPE should be inspected for signs of wear and tear, damage, or contamination, and should be replaced as necessary. Additionally, companies should establish protocols for the proper cleaning and storage of Arc Flash PPE to maintain its protective properties.





11. COMMON CAUSES OF ARC FLASH INCIDENTS

Arc Flash incidents can occur due to a variety of factors, often related to electrical equipment and human error. Understanding these causes is crucial for implementing effective preventive measures. The most common causes include:

- **Equipment failure:** Faulty equipment, such as deteriorating insulation, loose connections, or worn-out components, can lead to an Arc Flash. Over time, electrical equipment can degrade, increasing the likelihood of an unintended electrical discharge.
- **Human error:** Human mistakes are a significant cause of Arc Flash incidents. These errors can include improperly installed equipment, incorrect maintenance procedures, or accidental contact with energized components. Even a small mistake, such as dropping a tool onto live parts, can trigger an Arc Flash.
- **Voltage spikes:** Sudden increases in voltage, often due to switching operations or lightning strikes, can create conditions conducive to an Arc Flash. These spikes can cause insulation breakdown or arc across gaps in conductors, leading to a flashover.
- **Dust and impurities:** Accumulation of dust, dirt, or moisture on electrical equipment can create conductive paths that lead to Arc Flash incidents. These contaminants can lower the resistance between conductors, allowing current to arc across them.
- **Corrosion:** Corrosion of electrical components can weaken their structural integrity, leading to faults that may cause an Arc Flash. Corrosion can create gaps in insulation or expose conductive parts, increasing the risk of electrical discharge.
- **Animal interference:** Animals, such as rodents, can inadvertently cause Arc Flash incidents by gnawing on cables or entering electrical enclosures. This can lead to short circuits or create conductive paths between energized components.

12. STEPS FOR CONDUCTING AN ARC FLASH RISK ASSESSMENT

Conducting an Arc Flash risk assessment is a critical process for identifying potential hazards and implementing protective measures. The following steps outline a comprehensive approach to conducting such an assessment:

Identify electrical hazards: The first step in an Arc Flash risk assessment is to identify all potential electrical hazards within the workplace. This includes examining electrical equipment, such as switchgear, transformers, and circuit breakers, as well as identifying areas where workers may be exposed to live electrical parts.

Determine incident energy levels: Once hazards are identified, the next step is to calculate the incident energy levels that workers could be exposed to in the event of an Arc Flash. This calculation considers factors such as the fault current, arc duration, and the distance between the worker and the potential source of the Arc Flash. The result is typically expressed in calories per square centimeter (cal/cm^2), which helps determine the necessary level of PPE.

Establish protection boundaries: Based on the incident energy calculations, protection boundaries are established to determine the safe working distances from potential Arc Flash sources. These boundaries help define the areas where PPE is required and where specific work practices must be followed to prevent Arc Flash incidents.

Evaluate equipment and work practices: The risk assessment should also evaluate the condition of electrical equipment and the work practices used by employees. This includes assessing whether equipment is properly maintained, whether lockout/tagout procedures are followed, and whether workers are adequately trained in safe electrical work practices.

Document findings and recommendations: Finally, the findings of the risk assessment should be documented, along with recommendations for reducing Arc Flash risks. This may include specifying PPE requirements, identifying equipment that needs maintenance or replacement, and suggesting changes to work practices to enhance safety.



13. IMPORTANCE OF REGULAR TRAINING AND EDUCATION ON ARC FLASH SAFETY

Regular training and education are crucial components of an effective Arc Flash safety program. Workers must be continually informed about the risks associated with Arc Flash incidents and trained in the proper use of PPE and safe work practices. The importance of regular training and education cannot be overstated for several reasons:

Keeping up with evolving standards: Electrical safety standards and regulations are constantly evolving, and regular training ensures that workers are up-to-date with the latest requirements. This includes understanding changes in PPE standards, risk assessment methodologies, and safe work practices.

Reinforcing safe work practices: Regular training helps reinforce safe work practices and ensures that workers do not become complacent over time. It provides an opportunity to review proper procedures, such as lockout/tagout, and emphasizes the importance of following these procedures to prevent Arc Flash incidents

Improving hazard awareness: Education programs help workers recognise potential hazards in their work environment. By understanding the causes and consequences of Arc Flash incidents, workers are more likely to take proactive steps to mitigate risks, such as maintaining a safe distance from energized equipment and avoiding shortcuts that could lead to accidents.

Ensuring proper PPE use: Training is essential for ensuring that workers understand how to properly use and maintain their PPE. This includes instructions on how to correctly don and doff Arc-rated garments, inspect PPE for signs of wear or damage, and store it properly to maintain its protective properties.

Encouraging a safety culture: Regular training and education foster a culture of safety within the organisation. When workers see that their employer is committed to ongoing safety education, they are more likely to take safety seriously and adhere to best practices, reducing the overall risk of Arc Flash incidents.

14. MAINTENANCE ARC FLASH PPE: Best practices

Proper maintenance of Arc Flash PPE is essential to ensure that it remains effective in protecting workers from the dangers of Arc Flash incidents. The following best practices outline how to care for and maintain Arc Flash PPE:

Regular inspections: PPE should be inspected regularly for signs of wear, damage, or contamination. Look for tears, frayed edges, discoloration, and other signs of degradation that could compromise the garment's protective properties. Inspections should be conducted before each use and at regular intervals, as specified by the manufacturer.

Proper cleaning: Follow the manufacturer's instructions for cleaning Arc Flash PPE. Use the recommended detergents and avoid bleach or other harsh chemicals that could damage the fabric. Washing PPE at the correct temperature and using the appropriate drying methods is crucial to maintaining its Arc-rated properties. Whenever possible, use laundry providers who specialize in industrial PPE care to ensure that garments are cleaned and maintained according to the specific requirements, thereby preserving their protective features.

Storage: Store Arc Flash PPE in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight and sources of heat. Avoid folding garments in ways that could cause creases, as this can weaken the fabric over time. Hanging garments on padded hangers is often the best method to prevent damage and maintain the integrity of the fabric.

Repairs: If PPE is damaged, it should be repaired according to the manufacturer's guidelines, using materials and methods that do not compromise its protective properties. If a garment is beyond repair, it should be removed from service and replaced with new PPE.

Tracking ssage and lifespan: Keep records of PPE usage and maintenance to track its lifespan. Some garments have a limited service life, depending on the frequency of use and exposure to harsh conditions. Replace PPE as needed to ensure that your team is always protected by garments that meet the necessary safety standards.

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alsico UK
Pittman Way, Fulwood
Preston, Lancashire, PR2 9ZD

Email: david.ward@alsico.co.uk
www.alsico.co.uk
Tel: :+44 (0) 01772 662500