



Safety Digest - Edition 6/2010

Environmental Sensitivities



More and more people report having adverse reactions to common substances in their daily environment. Products such as office cleaning solutions, perfumes, air fresheners, hairsprays or aftershave lotions can trigger a reaction ranging from mild to serious in some people. Avoidance of triggers is extremely difficult because of the widespread use of fragranced products. This can make it difficult for individuals with sensitivities to function in the workplace and other public environments.

Often, environmentally sensitive people are reluctant to speak up on their own behalf, as they do not wish to inconvenience anyone, so they suffer in silence. Some may not even realize that the products or combination of products used around them are causing their symptoms. The number of people affected by environmental sensitivities continues to grow. Possible causes for individuals developing a sensitivity to chemical fumes may be the continuous exposure to an over-abundance of these fumes. Therefore, it makes sense for all of us to limit or eliminate our exposure to the substances that can trigger a negative reaction.

Reported common reactions include: headaches, sore throat, eye irritation, nausea, shortness of breath, wheezing, sinus pain, dizziness, fatigue, poor concentration, anxiety, sweating, joint aches, and skin irritation. Since we all share the air, we need to use common sense and exercise courtesy. The following tips can be used to help address environmental sensitivities in the workplace:

- Avoid using scented products, such as perfumes, aftershave lotions, and hairsprays;
- Use odourless products to clean and freshen your office area. Replace strongly scented cleaning solutions with unscented, environment-friendly products. Read product labels and be informed. Further information regarding a particular product should be directed to the manufacturer of the product;
- If the cleaning solutions, washroom air fresheners and other products used by the building maintenance workers affect you, report it to your General Safety Officer or to the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Committee;
- Replace regular permanent pen markers with an odourless type. Fumes from marker pens or

cleaning products can cause headaches and nausea, especially in an enclosed area such as a boardroom;

- Ensure all office products which have odours (for instance, photocopier cartridges) are tightly sealed and properly stored;
- Ensure that printer filters are replaced when suggested by the manufacturer;
- Eliminate sources of dampness, such as overwatered plants, humidifiers, or coffee spills. Dampness encourages the growth of mold which can cause unpleasant odours and trigger allergic reactions in some people;
- Take care of your plants, and don't treat them with chemicals in the work environment. Flowering plants in the workplace are not advisable because some employees may be allergic to them; and,
- Do not block the air vents in window bays with books, files or plants. Inadequate ventilation and air exchange can also contribute to increased exposure to fumes and odours and decrease indoor air quality.

Did you know that many scented products we use every day can seriously affect our co-workers, especially those who suffer from environmental sensitivities, allergies or asthma?

Employees experiencing symptoms of environmental sensitivities should report to their immediate supervisor, the areas or situations that appear to trigger an adverse reaction. Depending on the apparent cause, the problem may be resolved at this level.

Managers have a key role to help protect environmentally sensitive employees in the workplace:

- If the employee's sensitivity is limited to scents from perfumes, hairspray, or aftershave lotions, etc., the manager/ supervisor may be able to quickly resolve the issue by requesting the cooperation of colleagues in restricting the use of these products. Employees should be reminded to show consideration for their colleagues by replacing their use of scented products with unscented ones and/or avoiding wearing perfume altogether in the workplace. Should this not be achieved, then the affected employee and the person wearing the perfume or scented product may need to be physically separated;
- Managers may wish to post signs on their floor to raise awareness of environmental sensitivities;
- When calling a meeting, aim for a scent-free environment by asking participants to refrain from wearing scented products; and,
- Before renovation or construction work begins on a floor, the manager should inform employees about the type of work taking place, and if necessary make arrangements to have environmentally sensitive employees temporarily relocated.

If you have allergies or sensitivities, let others around you know of your health concerns. If you are aware of someone who is sensitive, be considerate and avoid using the substances which might trigger a negative reaction.

Taking care of our work environment is a team effort. By applying these common-sense principles we can do our part in improving the air quality in our workplace. Together we can make a difference.

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