



# Accommodating Employees with Environmental Sensitivities

## **A Guide for the Workplace**

# ASHRAE Standard 62-2001

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defines "acceptable indoor air quality" as "air in which there are no known contaminants at harmful concentrations as determined by cognizant authorities and with which a substantial majority (80% or more) of the people exposed do not express dissatisfaction." [Emphasis added.]

# Toxins / Irritants / Sensitizers

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- ◆ Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) including those found in scented products
- ◆ Bacteria, fungi, moulds, dust and dust mites
- ◆ Building materials containing VOCs, including carpets
- ◆ Paints, waxes and cleaning products
- ◆ Pesticides, bactericides, herbicides and fungicides
- ◆ Fuels (e.g., propane, natural gas, gasoline, oil, etc.)
- ◆ Lead, radon, asbestos
- ◆ Pets, plants
- ◆ Electromagnetic radiation
- ◆ Foods
- ◆ Other substances not normally thought of as noxious

# Environmental Sensitivities

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- ◆ Many common things can cause adverse reactions.
- ◆ Avoidance is the best treatment.

# Physical Signs and Symptoms <sup>(1)</sup>

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- ◆ Recurrent headaches and migraines
- ◆ Irritated eyes and recurrent styes
- ◆ Puffy bags or dark circles under eyes
- ◆ Red ears or ear lobes
- ◆ Frequent ear, nose and throat infections, ringing ears
- ◆ Hoarse throat, laryngitis
- ◆ Recurrent earaches and sinusitis
- ◆ Stuffy, runny and/or itchy nose
- ◆ Coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, breathing difficulties
- ◆ Asthma
- ◆ Anaphylactic shock
- ◆ Urinary and reproductive problems

# Physical Signs and Symptoms (2)

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- ◆ Mouth – metallic taste, dryness, cracking, excessive saliva, skin peeling or blistering
- ◆ Mouth breathing and throat clearing
- ◆ Stomach aches or diarrhea
- ◆ Eczema, hives and other skin rashes
- ◆ Light sensitivity and visual disturbances
- ◆ Numbness, stiffness, pain, weakness, swelling, "arthritic" symptoms of muscles, bones and joints
- ◆ Weakness and dizziness
- ◆ Loss of coordination, seizures, convulsions or tremors

# Performance and Behavioural Signs and Symptoms

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- ◆ Poor concentration
- ◆ Memory loss
- ◆ Difficulty problem-solving
- ◆ Inconsistent performance
- ◆ Mood and personality changes
- ◆ Recurrent absences
- ◆ Irritability
- ◆ Drowsiness, fatigue
- ◆ Aggression and exhaustion
- ◆ Depression and suicidal tendencies

# Some Educational Resources

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- ◆ Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation  
700 Montreal Road, Ottawa, ON K1A 1E1
- ◆ Canadian Human Rights Commission  
Human Rights Promotion Branch  
320 Queen Street, Place de Ville, Tower "A"  
Ottawa, ON K1A 1E1
- ◆ Self-help consumer groups

# Action Plan for Employees with Environmental Sensitivities

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- ◆ Improve indoor air quality (see **A Guide for Building Managers**)
- ◆ Offer flexible work options
- ◆ Additional accommodations may include:
  - ◆ suitable office location
  - ◆ carpet-free office
  - ◆ windows that open, if appropriate
  - ◆ tolerable furniture, cleaning products and supplies
  - ◆ low-EMF equipment or shields
  - ◆ HEPA filter air cleaner

# How an Effective Self-identification Registry Would Function

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- ◆ An employee who has environmental sensitivities has self-identified and requested personal notification of building maintenance and renovation activities.
- ◆ She has been on vacation for several weeks and so has not received an e-mail notice that was sent to all employees informing them that solvent glues will be used to apply vinyl wall coverings throughout the building.

## How ... (2)

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- ◆ On the day the employee is scheduled to return from vacation, remodelling will take place on the floor where her office is located.
- ◆ The day before the employee returns to work, her supervisor (or a person designated by the supervisor) telephones her at home to advise her of the remodelling activities.

## How ... (3)

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- ◆ The employee and her supervisor then agrees to the best solution in the circumstances.
  - For example, the employee could work at home for a few days to avoid illness.
  - *Better still, more tolerable construction and remodelling materials including low-VOC paints, or cellulose wallpaper and low-VOC glues could have been used in the first place.*

# What Managers Can Do

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- ◆ Be aware that sensitivities are individualistic and variable
- ◆ Be aware of employee needs
- ◆ Engage in open two-way communication
- ◆ Know emergency procedures
- ◆ Be knowledgeable about indoor air quality and triggers affecting employees who have environmental sensitivities
- ◆ Remove known allergens
- ◆ Promote and use unscented products

# A Note to Managers

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- ◆ You are encouraged to distribute to all employees copies of the **Employee Awareness Kit.**

# Environmental Sensitivities

## The Hidden Costs

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- ◆ Employee attitude
- ◆ Concentration
- ◆ Health costs
- ◆ Job performance
- ◆ Absenteeism
- ◆ Vision
- ◆ Learning ability
- ◆ Total cost of production

By working together,  
we can create healthier  
environments for ALL, and  
accommodate the needs of  
persons who have  
environmental sensitivities