

SICK BUILDINGS AND SICK PEOPLE

It is very common for companies to move into brand new sparkling offices and for their employees to become significantly unwell. New sparkling office buildings do not always equate with fit, health employees.

Symptoms known as sick building syndrome can be a manager's nightmare because the symptoms are often non-descript, vague, difficult to treat and can be significant in number. Employees often complain of headaches, dry eyes, nose and throat irritation, dry skin, chronic catarrh, breathing difficulties, abnormal tastes, an odd sense of smell, tiredness, vertigo, poor concentration and nausea. The most important factor, if sick building syndrome is to be considered, is that employees improve when they leave work and their symptoms settle at the weekend or when they take annual leave.

When considering the working environment within an office or factory, it is also important to be aware of the external environment and any potential pollution issues. Chemicals, dust or solvents may be pulled in to a working environment by ventilation systems. There is often a direct link between indoor and outdoor air quality.

What are the issues that employers should be aware of:

1. **PM 10** (very fine particles of 10 microns or less), cigarette smoke, diesel engine exhaust, dust from printing or paper shredding can produce very fine small particles. It is important therefore to be aware of vehicle movements outside the working environment and also where printing and shredding takes place. Now that smoking was banned within the working environment, consideration should be given to where smokers are allowed to congregate and whether this can have an impact on those inside a building. Weather can also affect indoor air quality.
2. **Nitrogen oxide** – nitrogen oxide is one of a number of toxic gases that are emitted commonly from vehicles. Other sources are gas appliances and cookers and hobs in kitchens. These gases can produce chest problems and aggravate asthma.

3. **Radon** – is responsible for 50% of our exposure to radiation in the UK. It is very common in certain geographical areas such as Scotland and the West Country where it radiates from the rock. Within the working environment, it is important that the working area is well ventilated. If you have concerns with regards to radio activity within your premises, further advice can be obtained from the National Radiation Protection Board or from the HSE.
4. **Solvents** – are very common, particularly in both office environments and manufacturing environments. Within office environments, solvents radiate from glue, furniture, carpets and a whole range of fabrics.
5. **Carbon monoxide** – as you are aware is very prevalent in our general environment. It is important to be aware of where the air intakes are in your building. If they are at street level, the ventilation systems can pull in significant levels of carbon monoxide from traffic and other sources.
6. **Moulds and fungi** – in poorly ventilated, damp working environments, employees can develop breathing difficulties due to high levels of mould and fungal spores. This is often seasonal, seen during the winter months and early Spring and can be particularly difficult for employees who suffer from asthma.
7. **The weather** – we underestimate the impact that the weather can have on our working environment. The weather can affect air pollution, it also affects the temperature and in modern buildings with large areas of glass there can be significant levels of solar heat. The weather can also affect internal humidity, which is a key factor in air quality.

Vague employee symptoms such as dry eyes, headache, abnormal taste, lethargy and poor concentration do not have to be a major problem for employers. Occupational health is able to advise on specific cases and also address physical issues and tease out any cultural or non medical issues that may have developed within a team or working environment. Environmental monitoring can be undertaken to assess a whole variety of physical issues as detailed above.

If you would like any further information on how Preventative Healthcare can help you manage your working environment, please do not hesitate to contact Penny Lovelock. Penny's can be contacted on either 01622 775289 or email: p.lovelock@phcohealth.co.uk

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