



Bad Indoor Air Quality

IT'S NO SURPRISE TO PUBLIC WORKERS THAT A HIGH percentage of their buildings have poor indoor air quality. Ventilation and air-conditioning systems often are not well maintained. The filters in central systems and unit ventilators may not be replaced or cleaned properly. Ducts and coils may not be cleaned routinely. The result? Not enough fresh or "outside" air flows into the work area, causing dead air spaces. Dust and other unidentifiable debris may be constantly recirculated. Occupants in poorly ventilated areas complain of fatigue, lack of energy, inability to concentrate and just plain grumpiness; they may also experience eye, nose and throat irritation. Fortunately, these symptoms generally go away once they leave the environment. An unfortunate few, however, are not so lucky. They go on to develop illnesses that are associated with exposures.

Water intrusion—floods, leaks and high humidity levels—is often responsible for air quality misery. Mold, bacteria and other microorganisms thrive in damp conditions. Researchers tell us that damp buildings promote or worsen allergies and asthma. Susceptible individuals may experience a variety of allergy symptoms, skin and eye irritation and

asthma attacks, all of which can be difficult to manage. Even those who don't suffer from allergies or asthma can develop eye, nose and throat irritation in chronically damp conditions.

Cleaning products, pesticides, perfumes, paints, copier toner, emissions from carpets and furniture and other volatile chemicals can contribute to poor air quality "soup" and can spark a host of symptoms in the occupants.

And, of course, rodents and insects—those unwelcome intruders—may trigger asthma and allergy attacks. On top of that, applying toxic pesticides to control these critters may make symptoms worse.

"Comfort" Issues

FINDING THE RIGHT TEMPERATURE TO SATISFY EVERYONE in a work area is probably impossible. However, when temperature extremes—too cold or too hot—become the norm indoors, everyone suffers. In very cold or very hot rooms, individuals must expend physiological energy to cope with the surroundings—energy that could be used to focus on work. Too often, managers imply that complaints about temperature extremes are petty in the scheme of things. Research has shown, however, that people simply don't perform as well, and attendance suffers, in very cold and very hot workplaces.

I Can't Hear You!

OBVIOUSLY, NOISY WORK SETTINGS ARE NOT CONducive to getting work done. What is not so obvious is that constant noise can lead to voice disorders for office-based employees who spend time on the telephone or others who must routinely use their voices at work.

What's more, people in noisy conditions secrete more stress hormones. Stress is a big distraction from the work at hand.



To keep from contributing to poor indoor environmental quality, your immediate work space should be free of clutter and there should be ample storage space.

Don't Ignore Symptoms

MANY EMPLOYEES MUST RELY ON A HOST OF ANTIBIOTICS, antihistamines and other drugs to see them through a typical day. If you suffer from symptoms or illnesses that are worse when you are at work, talk to your healthcare provider about possible environmental exposures. Your provider might have suggestions about what you can do in your personal workspace that would alleviate the problem. Some allergy sufferers have found that storing paper and books in containers with lids, instead of in cardboard boxes, helps reduce symptoms associated with dust exposure. Others have found relief from a dehumidifier. Every situation is unique, so it's best to start with your healthcare provider when seeking a solution.

Getting Advice

YOUR UNION REPRESENTATIVE OR UNION LEADER probably will know how best to approach management if you have a complaint about the environmental quality of your office or work area.

Discuss your issues with the rep; perhaps others in the building are having problems, too. Many unions have health and safety committees, and your rep may be able to steer you to that committee for assistance. The committee can help by surveying the staff to get a better idea of common complaints or symptoms. Here are a few suggestions to keep in mind regarding a union approach to IEQ problems:

- Form a building IEQ committee or health and safety committee.
- Document what is wrong with the air quality in your building.
- Discuss your findings and formulate demands with your co-workers and local union.
- Keep the membership informed.

Let the other workers in the building know what's going on. Report victories—no matter how small they seem—through leaflets, meetings, etc. Your co-workers are more apt to participate in activities if they have been made aware of what's been happening each step of the way.

What's Your Indoor Environmental Quality? How Can You Help Improve It?

For years workers have complained about the quality of the air in the public buildings they work in. "It's too hot," "It's too cold," "The air stinks," "There's no air circulating," "If only we could open a window!" are common complaints, among others. Sound familiar? Why not take a few minutes right now to compare your worksite with the "ideal worksite" below—check any or all that apply to your work environment.

What's Your Score?

SO, HOW DID YOUR WORKSPACE MEASURE UP?

If you selected yes more often than no, you're one of the lucky few. Many public employees have to cope with workspaces that suffer from poor *indoor environmental quality* (IEQ). Poor IEQ occurs when a workspace is provided without much thought about how to accommodate the employees and the job that is being done there.

Good general ventilation: Generous amounts of outside air are brought into your space from windows or mechanical ventilation (through ducts).

Yes **No**

Not too hot and not too cold: Temperature and humidity ranges are comfortable (around 75° F, with relative humidity at about 50 percent).

Yes **No**

Quiet: Noise levels are low enough that you can speak in your normal voice and can focus on your work.

Yes **No**

Adequate lighting: Good lighting includes both natural daylight and artificial lighting that can be adjusted as needed.

Yes **No**

Unfortunately, poor IEQ is more than a daily annoyance; it can lead to poor health and productivity problems. Inside this brochure, you will find just a few examples of how poor IEQ can affect you.

Successful Union Campaigns

SEVERAL AFT LOCALS HAVE WORKED WITH MANAGEMENT to improve indoor environmental quality through health and safety committees and other activities. Examples of initiatives include:

- "Green" Cleaning—Finding safer, fragrance-free substitutes for general cleaners, glass cleaners and bathroom cleaners may spare many from watery eyes and sneezing. The AFT supported the effort of the Healthy Schools Campaign to distribute CDs describing best practices. This applies to green cleaning in offices also. (www.healthyschoolscampaign.org).

Furniture that "fits": Furniture is adjusted for comfort and support.

Yes **No**

Appropriate use of space: Your work area is used as originally designed, or has been appropriately altered for the new use (e.g., walls haven't been put up that block air circulation).

Yes **No**

Cleanliness: Area is not crowded, cluttered or dusty.

Yes **No**

Good and plentiful storage: Ample storage space is available for equipment and supplies. It's not all piled up in your immediate work space.

Yes **No**

- Best Practice Policies—Locals have urged employers to adopt "best practices" to protect occupants from poor environmental quality, including routine maintenance of buildings, renovation standards, mold mitigation and integrated pest management (IPM).

An AFT Public Employee local in Connecticut had many members in a 20-story state office building who were experiencing typical symptoms associated with a sick building such as shortness of breath, coughing, sinus problems, throat irritation, rash or itchy skin, to name a few. The building had a history of water incursion through windows, roof and balconies. Through a very public campaign, the local was able to get the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health involved and also convinced the state to intervene and dedicate millions of dollars on remediation. As a result, the symptom complaints by the building's occupants have decreased dramatically.

Check with your local union to see if indoor environmental quality is on the agenda. And, if you're interested, volunteer to become involved in union IEQ initiatives.

For more information, contact the AFT health and safety team at 4healthandsafety@aft.org

Healthy Workspaces

Improving Indoor Environmental Quality in Public Buildings

