



Is Your Workplace Making You Sick?

Hidden health risks lurk in unexpected places in every workplace. Here's the scoop on common hazards you may encounter at the office – and what you can do about them.

BY GABRIELLE BAUER

PHOTOGRAPHY, PHILIP ROSTON/MASTERFILE

GERMS

Germs, such as bacteria and viruses, spread rapidly in places where there are a lot of people, and the office is no exception. The higher the head count, the greater your risk of getting sick.

Flu and cold viruses – by far the most common office germs – are spread through coughs and sneezes, and by touching contaminated surfaces, says Dr. Roy Fox, medical director of the Nova Scotia Environmental Health Centre in Halifax. “They can survive for two or more hours on surfaces such as doorknobs or photocopiers,” he says.

Hot spots

Dr. Charles Gerba, a microbiology professor at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Ariz., conducted a study of germs in the workplace and found that common office surfaces had – get ready for this – 400 times more germs than a toilet seat. The telephone, desktop, water fountain handle, microwave door handle and keyboard took top honours as the most germ-laden surfaces.

Interestingly, Gerba has also found that women’s workplaces harbour nearly three times more bacteria than men’s, even though they generally look cleaner. The main reason? Additional bacteria on the extra “stuff,” such as makeup bags, picture frames and purses.

What you can do

➤ Clean your keyboard, office doorknob, copier buttons, countertops and your phone. In Gerba’s study, daily cleaning with a disinfectant wipe lowered the germ count on office surfaces by 99.9 per cent. Berman touts old-fashioned bleach

and water (in a one-to-50 ratio) as the best cleaning solution.

➤ Wash your hands several times a day with soap and warm water for 15 to 20 seconds; rinse them thoroughly before drying with a paper towel.

TIP: While not all experts agree, Dr. Fred Berman, an internationally renowned toxicologist who directs the Toxicology Information Center at Oregon Health and Science University in Portland, Ore., suggests taking a pass on antibacterial soaps, which he says can foster resistant strains of bacteria.

INDOOR AIR QUALITY

Many office buildings have limited ventilation, which allows dust, gases and possible toxins to build up inside, says Sandra Bello, a health and safety technical specialist with the Chemical Services Unit at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. At the same time, Bello says, chemicals used to maintain office buildings are often trapped indoors by inadequate air circulation.

Hot spots

There’s a good chance that your cubicle partition contains some volatile organic compounds (VOCs) – organic chemicals that produce vapours at room temperature. VOCs include acetone and the chlorinated solvents found in some upholstery.

You may not think of the office photocopier as a source of bad air, but “when it is being used, ultrafine particles from the toner escape into the air,” says Dr. Barbara MacKinnon, CEO and president of the New Brunswick Lung Association. You don’t need to worry about handling toner cartridges, though. They are sealed, so there’s no direct contact with toner, says MacKinnon.

Don’t forget the potential hazard from above. “Dust, dirt and other particles can collect on the top of ceiling tiles,” says Patrick Smale, president of E.K. Gillin and Associates, an environmental health and safety firm in Stratford, Ont. “The ventilation system may reintroduce them into the air.”

Smell a Headache Coming On?

Scented cosmetics, perfumes and air fresheners may cause headaches, dizziness, nausea, fatigue, poor concentration, skin irritation and upper respiratory problems. (That’s quite a list!) If you have allergies or asthma, certain odours can trigger an attack. This is why scent-free policies are becoming increasingly common in workplaces.

Concerned about approaching an overly perfumed coworker? Simply tell her you have health problems that are aggravated by perfumes. If this gets you nowhere, talk to your supervisor.

What you can do

➤ If the air around your cubicle is too dry, get approval from your supervisor or health and safety committee to install a humidifier in your workspace.

➤ Most offices do not have routine indoor air quality checks, says Smale. If you have a concern, ask your organization to hire a professional to look into it.

➤ If at all possible, Bello says, new furniture and carpeting should air out in an off-site location for a few days to release the worst of its VOC gases before entering the office. By the same token, your company should be purchasing materials with low VOC content and emission rates. Let your health and safety committee know you care about these issues.

➤ If your office photocopier is too close for comfort, ask for it to be moved.

TIP: Check out Health Canada’s guidelines for air quality in office buildings at www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ewh-semt/pubs.

MOULD

Mould thrives in moist environments (namely those with a relative humidity of more than 50 per cent). Poor ventilation and water leaks can generate excess

Feel like lunging for the hand sanitizer? See our online guide to the benefits and limitations of germ killers, plus we’ll tell you when to stick to old-fashioned hand-washing.

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moisture. For some people, mould can lead to eye, nose or throat irritation, a runny nose, sinus congestion, coughing and wheezing. Not only can mould trigger reactions in people with allergies or asthma, but new research also suggests it may actually cause asthma.

Hot spots

Window ledges, vinyl wall coverings and wall-mounted fixtures can collect moisture and trap dirt, giving mould a good place to grow. It can also settle into carpets without being visible.

What you can do

▶ If you're using a humidifier, empty and clean it regularly to avoid mould and bacterial buildup, says MacKinnon. Check the manufacturer's cleaning instructions.

▶ Ask management to replace discoloured ceiling tiles that may well be mouldy. "Companies are not legally mandated to clean carpets or check for mould at specific intervals, unless it is found to be a health hazard," Smale says. "It's up to the individuals in an organization to notice and report it."

▶ Professional cleaners, as well as commercially available cleansing solutions and equipment, can remove mould with antimicrobial solutions, adds Smale. Alternatively, high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA) or P100 filters installed in the ventilation system can remove airborne mould.

▶ If you suspect you're reacting to carpet mould but don't know for sure, Smale says you can ask your workplace to have the office carpeting analyzed in a lab.

▶ If your office water cooler is not being cleaned regularly, you can bring the matter up with your supervisor or health and safety committee.

TIP: If you take your lunch to work, put it in the office fridge as soon as you get there. Make sure the fridge is set no higher than 4 C and consider a rotating fridge-cleaning schedule among your coworkers. (Many experts recommend cleaning once a week.) While bathrooms are generally cleaned by building personnel, you can set up a similar schedule for your office bathroom, should your situation warrant it. ▶

Scars Stretch marks Uneven skin tone?

After endless procrastination, I finally committed to doing something constructive about the extra 22 lbs I'd been carrying around with me since my teenage years. I started eating healthily, began exercising and before long, I started seeing results. I felt incredibly motivated until I noticed stretch marks on my hips and stomach. Luckily a close friend recommended Bio-Oil (she had used it throughout her pregnancy for stretch marks). I have now reached my goal weight and the results have been unbelievable! Thank you Bio-Oil for saving the day, and just in time for summer!*

Vanessa Hartley

Bio-Oil® is a specialist skincare product formulated to help improve the appearance of scars, stretch marks and uneven skin tone. Its unique formulation, which contains the breakthrough ingredient PurCellin Oil™, is also highly effective for aging and dehydrated skin. Bio-Oil absorbs quickly and leaves no oily residue. It is suitable for all skin types and should be applied twice daily. Bio-Oil is available at Shoppers Drug Mart and other leading retailers. *Individual results may vary. For more information ask your pharmacist or visit bio-oil.com.



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LIGHTING

Too much, too little, glaring, flickering – any of these lighting problems can cause eye strain and irritation, blurred vision, dry and burning eyes, and headaches. Excessive lighting can even cause migraines. Poor lighting conditions may force you to sit uncomfortably while reading or writing, with a stiff neck and shoulders to show for it.

Hot spots

Computer screens reflect light and may cause a glare when directly illuminated. Fluorescent lighting bothers some people more than others, and can give you an intense headache.

What you can do

- If you don't have enough light, try using a task lamp at your desk.
- Filters diffuse harsh overhead lighting.
- If your building has too much natural light, use mesh blinds to cut down on glare.
- If your computer still glares back at you, position your workstation so the window is at your side, rather than at your back. Experiment with your computer screen's brightness and contrast controls to find the most comfortable levels for you.
- In some offices, you may be able to turn off the overhead fluorescent lighting and use desk lamps instead.

ERGONOMICS

Repetitive movements and poor office design can leave you with a musculoskeletal injury (MSI), such as neck pain or carpal tunnel syndrome.

Hot spots

The wrong desk, chair or computer keyboard lurks behind many a workplace MSI, while the repetitive movements you do at work – typing, moving the mouse back and forth, reaching for the telephone – account for the rest. Recently, people have been talking about “BlackBerry thumb,” adds Ben Amick, scientific director of the Institute for Work and Health, a Toronto-based research organization.

Who to Turn To

Many workplace health issues can be resolved through your health and safety committee. If your complaint falls on deaf ears, you can contact the occupational health and safety branch of your province's labour ministry. If you still get nowhere and you can demonstrate a link between your office environment and your health woes, “you may have the legal right to refuse unsafe work,” says Caroline Ursulak, an employment lawyer based in Toronto.

Specific health conditions, such as allergies, are considered a disability, adds Ursulak. “This means your employer may have to accommodate your needs.” If your request (say, to have carpet mould removed) goes unheeded, she says, you can file a complaint with the human rights tribunal (or equivalent) in your province.

“It could well turn out to be a real type of repetitive strain injury.”

What you can do

“Most employers are willing to invest in ergonomic equipment if it's going to solve a problem,” says Amick, who also suggests you ask your health and safety committee for basic ergonomic training, which covers the proper use of furniture and equipment. Here are some pointers to get you started.

- To minimize head and neck strain, make sure your monitor is no higher than eye level and no lower than a 20-degree angle below eye level.
- Get a chair with arm rests.
- Consider using a trackball or stylus mouse and rounded keyboard, which allow your wrists to maintain a neutral position and can significantly reduce wrist strain.
- Take breaks, which give your muscles a chance to recover and move in different ways. ●