

Your Workplace Can Leave You Feeling Ill

By Kathleen Doheny, HealthDay Reporter
HealthDay

FRIDAY, May 26 (HealthDay News) -- Do you feel sick or run down every time you work overtime?

You could work in a building that produces what health experts call "sick building syndrome."

Poor indoor air quality or other pollutant and toxin problems can leave workers suffering from such acute health problems as eye, throat and nose irritation, headaches, coughing, dizziness and nausea.

And if your home isn't offering a respite, chances are the environment there contains pollutants or toxins, too.

While some cases of sick building syndrome are more serious than others, in many instances relief can be found with better maintenance, getting rid of mold and mildew -- even adding house plants to your surroundings.

In office buildings, "the biggest problem is with indoor air quality," said Bob Adams, a senior manager at New Jersey-based Environ International, a consulting firm that addresses environmental risk and health issues.

"Offices are designed for efficiency," he said. "We cut down the outdoor air supply [and re-circulate], and it leads to problems."

The result is what Adams calls "stale air syndrome."

Besides stuffy air, other chemicals and toxins can cause trouble at work. They include indoor toxins from copy machines, cleaning agents and pesticides, and combustion byproducts from nearby buildings or garages. Also, viruses, molds, pollen and bacteria can hide in stagnant water that accumulates on carpets or in ceiling tiles, according to the National Safety Council.

If you suspect something's lurking on the premises or in the air system, you might want to ask your boss how well-maintained the air system is.

"I find the better the maintenance in the building, the less likely it is they will have indoor air quality problems," said Adams, who's also a member of the American Industrial Hygiene Association. Office buildings in "high-rent" districts are less likely to have problems, he said.

No matter how good the maintenance, if construction is taking place, problems often follow, Adams said, unless the area is sealed off to prevent the spread of odors and particles from building materials, paints and construction dust.

Beware, too, new carpets and furnishings. Treatments used on them can "off-gas" and emit allergy-producing chemicals, heightening problems for people who already have allergies or asthma, he said.

Even at home, pollutants are everywhere, especially if you're a less-than-stellar housekeeper, said Kristin Marstiller, a spokeswoman for the National Safety Council. Pet dander, saliva and feces -- all the little unpleasanties that go with owning a pet -- can cause asthma attacks in people with the condition, she said. Mold spores are asthma triggers, too.

"If you can see mold, it needs to be removed," Marstiller said. And you need to remove the water source -- such as carpeting, dry wall or flooring -- to eliminate it altogether, she said.

Dust mites cause allergic reactions, too. "That's a matter of making sure you wash your pillows and sheets in very hot water very frequently," she said.

To cut down on toxins, "have your gas appliances serviced regularly, according to manufacturer's instructions," Marstiller said. And change your furnace filters on the schedule recommended by the manufacturer or your furnace repairman.

Finally, decorate with plants, which can help filter out pollutants. Bill Wolverton, a former NASA scientist, published a study in 1989 that found plants really do help scrub the air.

Since then, he has opened his own consulting firm and written a book, "How to Grow Fresh Air," which lists the best 50 plants for combating home and office pollutants. Asked to pick five, he lists lady palm, areca palm, bamboo palm, rubber plants and dracaenas.

More information

To learn more about sick building syndrome, visit the U.S. [Environmental Protection Agency](#).

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