

## INDOOR AIR QUALITY

### **Fragrances and Odors in the Workplace**

*Source: Keenan & Associates*

#### **Fragrance Sensitivity**

What is fragrance sensitivity? It is an allergic reaction or irritation caused by one or more chemicals. Fragrance sensitivity affects more than 2,000,000 people and that number is growing every day. When we think of fragrances we typically think first of perfumes and colognes, but fragrances are added to thousands of products including deodorants, cosmetics, air fresheners, deodorizers, cleaning products, pesticides, and many more. Air fresheners and deodorizers use chemicals to either mask unpleasant odors by hiding one scent with another, or to desensitize your nose to the odor. Air fresheners and deodorizers do nothing to improve the quality of indoor air.

People who suffer from fragrance sensitivity experience headaches, itching and burning of the skin, rashes, nausea, itching and burning of the eyes, sneezing, runny nose, congestion, dizziness, inability to concentrate, and trouble breathing. Fragrance sensitivity can also worsen asthma symptoms.

These chemicals have been known to cause irritation of the eyes, nose, throat, and sinuses, as well as difficulty breathing, asthmatic reactions, and changes in nervous system function such as loss of balance, tremors, and convulsions. These chemicals are especially harmful to people with compromised immune systems and to children who are sensitive to chemicals.

#### **What Can Be Done**

- Keep rooms and offices clean. While custodians are responsible for cleaning, teachers and staff must ensure that rooms are not full of clutter that makes cleaning difficult.
- Keep the air flowing. Make sure that vents are open and not blocked by storage or covered up.
- Only use district-approved cleaning products; do not bring products from home.
- Use the EPA Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools program at: <https://www.epa.gov/iaq-schools>
- They are called pests for a reason. If food is allowed, limit the quantity on hand and store it in airtight containers.
- Discard upholstered furniture. Keep stuffed animals to a minimum.
- Use less toxic instructional, art, and science products.
- Generally speaking, outside air is good for you. If possible, open doors and windows during moderate days.
- Limit the amount of fragrances you use in personal hygiene. The nose you save just may be your own!

This information on the Risk Advisor website is intended to assist Keenan clients in identifying and reducing certain loss exposures. It is not possible for us to identify all potential sources of liability or to offer a fail-safe mechanism for dealing with them. Keenan offers no guarantee that clients will recognize any financial savings or improved loss experience as a result of the information and suggestions presented here.

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When faced with an objectionable odor in an indoor environment, the proper response is to find the source of the odor and remove it, not to cover it up with a chemical product. If you have a concern about an odor in your workspace, please consult with your Supervisor, Maintenance Department, or a District Administrator.

### **Scents and Sensibility - Accommodating Fragrance Sensitivity in Schools**

We've all had the experience where we found ourselves in close quarters with those who not only use, but abuse, perfumes, colognes and body sprays. For most of us, it's simply an unpleasant experience, but for those with severe allergies and other fragrance sensitivities, it's more. It can interfere with the ability to work, learn and can even become a life-threatening emergency. Consider the following events, which is just a small sampling of recent news reports, of how these issues are impacting schools and other public sector entities:

- The mother of a 17-year-old Indiana high school student filed a lawsuit against her son's school district claiming the District failed to protect her allergic son from perfume, cologne and body scent sprays. The lawsuit was filed as a violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- The City of Detroit settled a lawsuit with an employee diagnosed as having Multi Chemical Sensitivity, who claimed that perfumes and other grooming products used by co-workers caused her breathing difficulties, and the city council violated the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by not providing her with a reasonable accommodation.
- A Delaware County elementary school teacher suffered a severe allergic reaction when a student in an "allergy-prone" classroom brought perfume to school and sprayed it on other students during class.
- In March of 2013, a Pennsylvania high school freshman was hospitalized with a life-threatening reaction from exposure to the Axe Body Spray at school.

### **What should you do if fragrance sensitivity issues arise?**

Consider adopting a fragrance-free policy. Many public and private organizations have fragrance policies that restrict or regulate the use of substances emitting strong odors. Among government agencies, the U.S. Census Bureau, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), the Portland Police Department, City of Detroit and multiple school districts have taken the lead on this issue. The policies vary in scope, with some "prohibiting" the use and application of scented products and others merely "requesting" but not requiring that they not be used or applied on site. Sample fragrance free policies can be found at the websites below:

<http://action.lung.org/site/DocServer/fragrance-free-policy-sample-updated.pdf>

[Model\\_Fragrance\\_Free\\_Statement.pdf](#)

If your District or Agency chooses to adopt and implement a fragrance-free policy, it should be applied with compassion and consistency. Post your policy and regularly remind staff, students and parents of the policies requirements. Further, educate your staff, students and parents about fragrance sensitivity. Educational information on fragrance sensitivity issues can be found on the following websites.

<https://www.asdk12.org/Page/3096>

<https://www.lung.org/assets/documents/asthma/healthy-air-classroom-checklist.pdf>