

Accommodating Employees with Environmental Sensitivities

A Guide for the Workplace

Employee Awareness Kit

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Guidelines for Employees

You can and should assist your employer in complying with the legal duty to accommodate employees with disabilities. There are many ways to help eliminate workplace barriers to fellow workers who have environmental sensitivities and to make it easier for them to work productively. If one of your fellow employees has environmental sensitivities, you should observe the following general rules.

- a) Remember that although environmental sensitivities may be non-evident, they are required by law to be accommodated like any other disability.
- b) Understand that your employer has a legal duty to provide accommodation to employees with disabilities, including workers with environmental sensitivities. You, as a co-worker, are an important part of the accommodation process. Without your participation and cooperation, an employee who has environmental sensitivities may not be able to achieve the accommodation they require to continue as a productive member of the workplace team.
- c) Understand that employees who receive accommodation because of their sensitivities are not receiving a favour or "special treatment". Rather, accommodation is a right under the law.
- d) Be aware that employees who have environmental sensitivities may require accommodations that might seem unusual to you. These accommodations could include a well-ventilated, closed office that is carpet-free, equipped with a portable air purifier, located near a window (preferably one that opens) and away from pollution sources such as photocopiers, fax machines, printers and vehicle exhaust. Your co-worker who has environmental sensitivities may also require older furniture, and may not be

Some of the toxins, irritants and sensitizers that contribute to unhealthy indoor environments include:

Toxins/Irritants/Sensitizers

- Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) including those found in scented products
- Bacteria, fungi, moulds, dust and dust mites
- Building materials containing VOCs, including carpets
- Paints, waxes and cleaning products
- Pesticides, bactericides, herbicides and fungicides
- Fuels (e.g. propane, natural gas, gasoline, oil, etc.)
- Lead, radon, asbestos
- Pets, plants
- Electromagnetic radiation
- Foods
- Other substances not normally thought of as noxious

Some of the performance and behavioural signs and symptoms of sensitivities are:

Performance and Behavioural Signs and Symptoms

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor concentration • Memory loss • Difficulty problem-solving • Inconsistent performance • Mood and personality changes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recurrent absences • Irritability • Drowsiness and fatigue • Aggression and exhaustion • Depression and suicidal tendencies |
|---|---|

Such problems make it very difficult for employees to work productively. Sensitivities affect each individual differently. Symptoms may be mild and merely

annoying, or they can be severe enough to interfere with daily activities, career and family life. Severe sensitivity can be life-threatening or fatal.

able to tolerate newspapers, or mouldy files and books.

- e) Check with employees who have environmental sensitivities before bringing new substances into the workplace.
- f) Avoid the use of products that contain volatile organic compounds (VOCs), such as cleaning products and office supplies, including correction fluid and solvent-based markers. Instead, use tolerated alternatives, including unscented, non-toxic cleaning products; unscented, water-based markers; and dry correction tape.
- g) Recognize that foods and even food aromas can trigger health and emotional stresses for employees with environmental sensitivities.
- h) Do not use scented products. Respect any “no- scent” policy that has been established in your workplace. Whether or not you are aware of it, if you wear scent, you are creating a barrier to workplace access for employees who have environmental sensitivities, contrary to Canadian human rights laws.
- i) It is important to realize that many scented products contain volatile organic compounds, such as alcohol, formaldehyde and other chemicals. Scented products and other chemicals, including fabric softeners – even unscented ones – can trigger symptoms in persons with environmental sensitivities, including those listed in the charts **“Physical Signs and Symptoms”** and **“Performance and Behavioural Signs and Symptoms”**. These reactions affect the health of employees. Some of the triggers for these reactions are set out in the chart, **“Toxins/Irritants/Sensitizers”**.

- A “no-scent” policy includes perfume, cologne, after-shave and scented personal care products such as deodorant, shampoos, hair products, cosmetics, soaps, hand creams, laundry detergents, fabric softeners, etc. Air smoke-laden and dry-cleaned clothing well before wearing. Avoid scented laundry detergents and **ALL** fabric softeners.

building and circulated throughout the ventilation system due to the “stack effect”. Environmental tobacco smoke has been found to be harmful to human health and may trigger reactions in employees who have environmental sensitivities.

- k) If requested by your manager, learn the required emergency procedures for employees’ reactions to allergens.
- l) Participate in the education process through workshops, conferences and publications provided by your employer.

J) Do not smoke near building entrances. It is known that contaminants near ground floor entrances are drawn into the

Some of the physical signs and symptoms of environmental sensitivities are:

Physical Signs and Symptoms

- Recurrent headaches and migraines
- Irritated eyes and recurrent styes
- Puffy bags or dark circles under eyes
- Red ears or ear lobes
- Frequent ear, nose and throat infections, ringing ears
- Hoarse throat, laryngitis
- Recurrent earaches and sinusitis
- Stuffy, runny and/or itchy nose
- Coughing, wheezing, chest tightness, breathing difficulties
- Asthma
- Anaphylactic shock
- Urinary and reproductive problems
- Mouth — metallic taste, dryness, cracking, excessive saliva, skin peeling or blistering
- Mouth breathing and throat clearing
- Stomach aches or diarrhea
- Eczema, hives and other skin rashes
- Light sensitivity and visual disturbances
- Numbness, stiffness, pain, weakness, swelling, “arthritic” symptoms of muscles, bones and joints
- Weakness and dizziness
- Loss of coordination, seizures, convulsions or tremors