

Suffering from sick- building syndrome?

Written by William George

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Sick-building syndrome (SBS) is sometimes the cause of severe headaches and eye irritation in a workplace, but, because of its complex diagnosis factors, it often goes unnoticed. WILLIAM GEORGE investigates

Sick-building syndrome (SBS) is a health-psychological condition that affects people residing or working in a building with poor indoor air quality.

The term was coined by the World Health Organization (WHO) in the 1980s.

At the time SBS was estimated to be present in almost 30 percent of new and remodelled buildings.

The condition is caused by a combination of factors present in poorly ventilated buildings, public spaces, workplaces and even homes.

The people suffering from SBS may experience various ailments, such as fatigue, headaches, difficulty in concentrating, irritation, dry eyes and skin rashes.

A psychological and organisational problem

According to The Health and Safety Executive (HSE), sick-building syndrome is not classified as an illness, but is a phenomenon caused by personal and organisational factors.

HSE notes that this “phenomenon” should not be confused with specific illnesses that can be

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directly associated with workplaces, such as exposure to specific toxic substances in the workplace, or long-term cumulative hazards.

HSE further explains that there are physical and environmental problems that can be exacerbated by an organisational factor, such as the lack of personal control over working conditions in an office, or a lack of work variation, which could lead to job dissatisfaction.

From the organisational side, new furnishings can release chemical pollutants into the atmosphere and poorly organised cleaning services can further exacerbate the problem.

As a result, the productivity of employees is affected, resulting in absenteeism, poor work morale and unwell employees.

The cause of SBS

Sick-building syndrome can be induced or worsened by:

- High room temperature;
- Air-conditioning;
- Very low or high humidity;
- Chemical pollutants;
- Dust particles and fibres in the atmosphere;

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- Smoking in the workplace; and

- Psychological factors such as stress or an inadequate work support system.

Cleaning the air

Uillog is one of the many companies with new technology that helps to manage SBS.

Through the use of its air-purifying device, the Safe-Air, known carcinogens regularly found to pollute indoor air are neutralised. These include volatile organic compounds, oxides of nitrogen, odours and cigarette smoke.

According to Uillog, employees working in transport, healthcare and aftercare centres at schools and pre-schools are reported to suffer most from the condition, due to a large number of people in those areas.

Trevor Williams, director at Uillog, says: "Some droplet nuclei can live in the air for hours, and molecules from a cough or sneeze can travel at 40 m. If you take into account that adults consume between 11 000 and 14 000 litres of air every 24 hours, breathing quality indoor air is vital for our well-being."

He adds: "The SafeAir is an ideal device that can be installed in public areas, such as gyms, malls, health centres, schools, offices and homes."

The other methods to manage the condition is through maintenance and repair of ventilation systems to allow for clean air to enter the work building. Cleaning of carpets and soft furniture is also necessary as they can trap dust and moisture, which could affect the indoor air quality.

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If all these methods fail to help to restore good quality air, it is advisable to contact a health or air-quality expert to help track down the cause of the poor air quality.