

Enhancing Occupier satisfaction

When heating and ventilation systems don't work efficiently, neither do people.

Too hot and they become sluggish. Too cold and you could be forced by law to shut the building down completely. It's more than just a case of comfortable working conditions. It's a Health and Safety issue as well.



According to government guidelines the ideal temperature in an office should normally be at least 20° C. If work involves physical effort it should be at least 16° C.

Added to which workplaces have to be adequately ventilated with ample circulation of fresh clean air.

You can improve business productivity if your employees, clients, customers and visitors are in a building that has clean, fresh air.

It's well known that contaminated air is one of the most common causes of Sick Building Syndrome. Poor indoor air quality can result from biological contamination, such as bacteria, moulds, pollen and viruses that may breed in air ducts, humidifiers and drain pans.



The Health and Safety Commission's code of practice states that all mechanical ventilation systems should be regularly and properly cleaned, tested and maintained to ensure that they are kept clean and free from anything which may contaminate the air. Regular air duct cleaning is clearly essential.

In fact, the Associated Code of Practice from the Health and Safety Commission states that all mechanical ventilation systems should be regularly and properly cleaned, tested and maintained to ensure that they are kept clean and free from anything which may contaminate the air. Regular air duct cleaning is clearly essential.

Inevitably all air duct systems become fouled over time. A regular programme of hygiene cleaning of ducts will deal with this and can be as simple as changing the filters on a regular basis.

A regular cleaning programme will ensure that the air duct systems in your heating, ventilation and air conditioning continue to provide clean, fresh air to the benefit of your business.



Sick Building Syndrome

Almost everyone occasionally suffers common symptoms such as headaches, dry throat or sore eyes. But there are occasions when people in particular buildings experience these sorts of symptoms more often than is usual. Symptoms tend to increase in severity with the time spent in the building and improve over time, or disappear when the person is away from the building. This is often described as Sick Building Syndrome (SBS).

According to the NHS, Sick Building Syndrome is a phenomenon where workers in particular office environments complain that they are experiencing a range of non-specific symptoms. These may include:

- Headaches.
- Fatigue.
- Loss of concentration.
- Eye and throat irritation.
- Shortness of breath.
- Skin rash.
- Dry skin.
- Itchy skin.

Symptoms are generally mild, although they may affect personal performance and motivation, sometimes significantly. Sick Building Syndrome is not a recognised illness that can be diagnosed precisely.

The symptoms usually resolve once the person who is experiencing them has left the building. Women are more likely to be affected by the symptoms of sick building syndrome than men.

There are many potential causes of Sick Building Syndrome, but in our experience the cause is frequently pinned down to physical or environmental factors such as flaws in the heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems, including the build-up of biological contamination, including bacteria and mould.

Other causative effects may include:

Job factors, e.g. the variety and interest of particular jobs; people's ability to control certain aspects of work and their working environment.

Factors may include:

Building and office design

- open plan offices with more than about 10 workstations;
- large areas of soft furnishing, open shelving, filing;
- new carpets or furniture and freshly painted surfaces.



Building services and maintenance

- air conditioning;
- lighting (glare and flicker in particular);
- low level of user control;
- poor design and maintenance/repair;
- Insufficient or badly organised cleaning.

Indoor environment and air quality

- high temperatures and excessive variations (e.g. draughts);
- very low or high humidity;
- chemical pollutants (e.g. ozone; tobacco smoke);
- dust/fibres in the atmosphere;
- noise.

Job factors

- routine clerical work
- work with display screen equipment

PREVENTING SICK BUILDING SYNDROME

Due to the causes of SBS being complex and largely unknown, it is not possible to identify generally applicable measures that might be taken which will prevent, eliminate or reduce SBS. What may work in one building may not work in another.

Investigations will be most cost-effective however if it is determined whether the symptoms are local to a part of a building or widespread and if checks start with the most likely sources of the problem.

Staff should be involved at an early stage. Procedures and working practices should be checked to ensure the proper operation and maintenance of the heating, ventilation and air conditioning systems. The general cleanliness of the interior of the building and furnishings should also be assessed.

Booklet HS(G)132 - How to deal with Sick Building Syndrome provides detailed advice on minimising risk in the main problem areas associated with SBS.

If, in spite of all your efforts, symptoms persist, you may need to call in expert professional advice from the following:

- building service engineers
- occupational health practitioners
- occupational hygienists
- ergonomists
- management specialists

To be cost effective, remedial action will need to strike a balance between the cost of any change and the effect the change is likely to have in reducing symptoms.

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