

Indoor Air Pollution: How I Treat A Sick Building

The patient who sat at my desk described how he had been to several doctors for his headaches, dizziness and other assorted symptoms. He had been told it was a virus or allergies or stress. Just wait, he had been told, it will pass. After a year he was tired of waiting

By doing a little detective work we had an answer before he left the office He had Sick Building Syndrome. Sick building syndrome is a catch all phrase for Indoor Air Pollution. Patients are sensitive to chemicals released in an enclosed space. Symptoms vary, but are often: Sinus irritation; runny nose; eye irritation (especially with contacts), headaches; dizziness; nausea; shortness of breath; rashes; fatigue. If you have several of these symptoms and you feel better when you leave a building you should be suspicious of "Sick Building Syndrome".

Sick Building Syndrome has many sources. A number of building materials gas off chemicals: Wall paneling, press and fiber board (used in counters and cabinets), insulation and carpets are notorious for giving off formaldehyde, often for years after installation (also many permanent-press clothes have formaldehyde to help hold the seam). Paints, varnish and their solvents give off ethylene. Wallpaper often has pesticides in the glue to stop insects from eating it. Counter tops and vinyl floors may have Benzene, Toluene and Methyl Ethyl Ketones in the glues (they usually gas off however in the first six months after installation.). Building furnishings are also a major contributor to Indoor air pollution. Carpeting (already mentioned for formaldehyde) is a great harboring place for molds that grow well when North westerners with wet feet feed them all winter. When dry, the molds become airborne, and aggravate the sinuses and airways of the afflicted victim causing a "winter" hay fever in many individuals. Plastic panels and furniture give off significant levels of Dimethyl Acedamide, especially when heated by a lamp or heating vent.

Office equipment must evaluated item by item for each type of office. Almost universal however is the ubiquitous copy machine, (ozone, carbon dust and volatile emissions), and carbonless copy paper (formaldehyde and other emissions).

Air handling systems can help or worsen the problem. When properly maintained and used to flush out old air it can be a great benefit. Unfortunately for the patient, his buildings maintenance people only added small quantities of fresh air daily (10%) and none on the weekends. Improperly maintained air systems can be a breeding place for molds and bacteria (such as Legionnaires Disease) in poorly drained condensation pans in cooling units. The pans can culture microbial slime that dries out and is spread throughout the system to carpets, ceiling tiles, counters, etc.

Building maintenance materials such as carpet shampoos, disinfectants, cleaning solutions and floor wax can also be a contributor to the problem.

Many individual homes have similar problems especially after weatherization. (Take my advice, pay a few extra dollars in heating bills and let fresh air into a few cracks. You'll save on medical bills in the long run.) If you are weatherized and have a wood burning stove, be sure to ventilate, even if the stove is supposed to be airtight.

The key to investigating a sick building is to accurately document health complaints, the pattern of the symptoms, onset, relations to the buildings environment and maintenance.

Treatment of the patient will vary of course, but identification of suspect agents, their isolation and possible removal is a start. A detoxification of the patient may be needed. Building the patient's immune system back up to optimum will often increase his/her tolerance to indoor air pollution.

The patient? Oh he's fine He arranged to have fresh air blown through the building on a regular basis by the maintenance department, took his lunch outside the office, managed to do field work several hours a week and used botanical medicines and nutrients to increase his chemical tolerance. No more headaches were reported. For reading on this subject I recommend, An Alternative Approach to Allergies by Theron G. Randolph M.D. and Ralph W. Moss, Ph.D.

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