

The Toxic Office - How To Make Your Workplace Healthier - The Bodywise Clinic

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How To Make Your Workplace Healthier

Believe it or not, **sick buildings** are a thing. Ever heard of Sick Building Syndrome (SBS)? SBS is a condition that generally affects office workers and is attributed to unhealthy work environments.

The buildings that we live and work in, but in particular work in, often make us ill. The effects are not necessarily pervasive, do not appear rapidly, and most people will never associate their health problems with their workplace.

Scientists have published many studies on the health implications for workers that spend their days in buildings with problems such as poor ventilation, damp or dusty air, and poor lighting.

We're not saying you should run out of office and never go back. But if you have the power to examine and make changes to the office that could positively affect your health, why wouldn't you? Of course, you need to know the problems before you can fix them.

The [HSE in Ireland](#) recognises the term Sick Building Syndrome (even if it merely refers to the NHS in the UK).

Common Sick Building Syndrome Issues

Air conditioning

Air conditioning systems often act as a conveyer belt for cold and flu delivery. Sometimes they spread pathogens such as mould around the office. But that's not the only problem with the air conditioning in most offices.

The main purpose of these units is **temperature regulation**. But forcing people to endure uncomfortable temperature levels in the office comes with its own issues.

Take a hint from Google. The management team in the Zurich HQ chose to shun air conditioning in favour of windows that open (Remember those?). Even with the freezing cold winter and short

but hot summer, workers manage just fine. There's no reason modern buildings can't have windows that people can open and close to help circulate air and regulate temperature.

Of course, you can't alter the temperature to a single digit degree. And breezes (especially in Ireland) can turn the room into a wind tunnel. But putting up with a slight breeze and a couple of degrees outside of your "perfect" temperature are a small price to pay for the benefit of fewer colds and flu, cleaner air, and a less nap-inducing environment.

What you can do

- Air conditioning units can improve productivity but they are so often neglected. The key is to service the units regularly and have them checked by independent experts.
- Consider opening windows when the weather allows it.

Lighting

Those strip lights that flood your office even at night and during the dark winter days, might help you find your phone on your desk without pulling out a candle, but the effects of artificial lights are far-reaching.

Humans evolved to follow the patterns of day and night set by the sun, not by office lighting. The artificial light from indoor overhead strip lighting and the **blue light from devices** such as computers and phones causes havoc with our internal clocks and sleeping patterns.

Older style lighting and poor quality lighting come with their own problems. [LED and Fluorescent light bulbs](#) often flicker. You might not notice it but the flicker is there. And your brain is subconsciously aware of it.

[Studies](#) have shown that lighting is one of the key factors affecting [sleep](#) in modern workers.

If you work in a part of the building that doesn't get any light from outside, your [circadian rhythm](#) changes. The body produces more [cortisol](#) and melatonin production is affected. [Symptoms](#) such as depression, irritability, tiredness, and lack of concentration are common among chronic sufferers.

What you can do

- Move your desk closer to a window. Take regular breaks from the screen.
- Reduce direct glare from strip lights by installing lamps around the office and out of a direct line of sight on your desk.
- If your desk is not near a window that gets plenty of light, or you can't escape your face

- If your desk is not near a window that gets plenty of light, or you can't expose your face, arms, and neck to sunlight (even in winter) on a daily basis, get a natural light therapy unit for your desk. They are inexpensive, portable, and are clinically proven to combat the effects of seasonal affective disorder (SAD). This isn't a perfect solution, but it will improve things.

Ergonomics

Most of us spend our days seated in front of a computer. Traditionally, this takes place in an office. Sitting is bad for your [posture](#).

It also increases your [risk of diabetes](#), Deep vein thrombosis, anxiety, back pain, varicose veins, and [cancer](#).

Everyone knows the benefits of working out and staying active, but we've arrived at a point where most people think it's okay to do an intense class of CrossFit, or run for 10k daily, and then spend the rest of the day sitting. Sorry to break the bad news, but this is worse for you than the person who doesn't exercise but stays active by walking, moving, and generally staying off the seat for most of their working day.

What you can do

There are plenty of ways to combat all the sitting

- Stand in meetings. Schedule your meetings in a room with either no chairs or one with a high table. You'll find that meetings that usually drag on, are more inclined to finish on time when participants are forced to stand.
- Avoid the lift. Take the stairs. This is a little trick that can improve your health, ability to focus, and energy levels overnight. Taking the stairs gets you moving and flushes the legs with blood. You'll feel less inclined to slouch at the desk and you'll experience less drowsiness if you take the stairs a couple of times a day.
- Get a standing desk. One of the easiest ways to take the strain off your lower back. It's not about losing weight (a standing desk won't help). It's about avoiding the sitting position. Alternative between 20-30 minutes shifts of standing vs sitting.
- Walk to the farthest toilet, water station, or coffee dock in the office. Instead of reaching around for the coffee and biscuits at hand, make a point of taking a mini break every half hour to move your entire body.
- Get a massage. Muscles tight from sitting and hunching can enjoy a [deep tissue massage](#) or a [hot stone massage](#). Your [posture](#) is important for your health. Don't let your office environment ruin your physical appearance and your ability to use your body to its potential.

Air Quality

Although Air Conditioning systems take charge of recycling the air in modern buildings, the main use for air conditioning units is to keep office spaces cool. This **aids productivity** when it's done right.

But the air only receives minimal filtering when passing through these systems. The filter is there to protect the conditioner. In fact, build up of **mould and other contaminants** inside air conditioning units lowers the quality of the air circulated.

Air conditioners cannot filter the tiny particles of matter that can cause serious health problems. **Air purifiers** remove contaminants from the air such as pollen, mould, viruses and pet hairs. Tobacco smoke isn't an issue for offices these days but if you work at home and you or someone in your home smokes, purifiers can help clean the air.

Air purifiers remove contaminants that can't be seen by the naked eye.

Indoor air pollution levels are often up to 5 **times higher than outdoor levels**. According to some reports, this figure reaches 100 times.

What you can do

- Install an air purifier.
- Remove items like cushions and upholstered furniture from the workspace.
- Clean and treat furniture for dust mites and replace carpet with hardwood, vinyl, laminate, or concrete flooring.
- Have the air ducts in the building cleaned regularly.
- Add plants such as the spider plant, bamboo palm, and weeping fig to the office space to help purify the air.
- Use ecologically friendly, fragrance and colour-free cleaning products for the office. The nasty chemicals in some cleaning products continue to disperse into the air long after the liquids have been applied to surfaces.

Humidity

Dehumidifiers reduce the relative humidity (percentage of water vapour) of the air.

This reduces the chances of mould growth

Dust mites cannot thrive in Indoor relative humidity (RH) levels of below 50%. Dehumidifiers

create environments [unfriendly to mould and bacteria](#) that might otherwise thrive.

But don't go overboard with the humidity levels. Very dry indoor environments cause skin, eyes, throat, and nose problems. The most comfortable level of humidity indoors is around 40%.

Humidifiers perform the opposite function. Sometimes an environment is too dry and needs adjusting. Plants in the office not only generate oxygen and clean the air (the effects are minimal but detectable), they increase the humidity by releasing moisture into the air.

What you can do

- If you're concerned about the humidity level of your work environment, purchase or ask your office manager to purchase a hygrometer. The readings from the hygrometer over a few days will show the average level of humidity in the office. Without the data, it's hard to make informed decisions so this should be the first step before making changes to the humidity levels.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms or complaints of people affected by Sick Building Syndrome (SBS)?

According to a report by the [Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology](#), symptoms include eye, nose, and throat irritation, dry skin, gastrointestinal complaints, asthma, headaches, fatigue, and many others.

Not every person is affected and many of those affected display no obvious symptoms, but the low-level systematic influences can have profound long-term effects on our health.

Asthma and hay fever sufferers might experience an increase in symptoms in buildings that are considered "unhealthy".

What you can do

Talk to your office manager to find out how you can improve the office environment. Make a case for higher productivity levels, fewer sick days, and a healthier, happier workforce thanks to a more comfortable and safe office environment.

Take regular screen breaks. Stand up and walk. Get outside into the fresh air and expose your face to the light for at least 20 minutes. Open windows to let fresh air in. Clean the office regularly with natural products. Have the air conditioning units serviced and install air purifiers and dehumidifiers if needed.

