

Is your Office Making you Sick?

Some buildings are getting so air-tight that not enough fresh air is getting in.

Can't keep your eyes open at work? Do you feel tired, grumpy or ill? While building owners switch to more robust insulation and efficient building envelopes to reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, some buildings are getting so air-tight that not enough fresh air is getting in.

A lack of adequate air circulation as well as a release of [volatile organic compounds \(VOCs\)](#) from office supplies, cleaning products and building materials can cause indoor air to be [two to five times](#) more polluted than city air.

When indoor air quality is poor, a phenomenon known [sick building syndrome \(SBS\)](#) can result. SBS is notoriously difficult to diagnose because of the disparate symptoms associated with it. Everything from respiratory ailments, headaches, eye and skin irritations, congestion, coughing and lethargy have been attributed to SBS. Here are some ways to eliminate VOCs and breathe some fresh air into your office space.

Green your Clean: Toss those chemical cleaners for eco-friendly options which don't produce VOCs. Avoid air fresheners as these only add to the chemicals you breathe in. You can make your own cleaners by [following our guide here](#).

Localize It: Catering for meetings or functions? Buy food that is locally sourced. Avoid disposable crockery and cutlery where possible and opt for biodegradable items if you must. Choose organic, fair trade coffee to keep your workers awake.

Material World: Ensure that there are recycling stations in your office and kitchen. If you have a coffee maker which uses pods, choose reusable ones to reduce waste. Switch to fabric napkins and towels in your kitchen and bathroom. Get mugs and glasses rather than disposable cups.

Travel Tip: The average Canadian faces a [25 minute commute](#) to work each day and wastes about 32 days sitting in traffic every year. Encourage and enable telecommuting, the use of public transportation and carpooling. Video conference with clients where you can to cut traveling costs.

It's a Jungle out There: You can literally green your office with plants. Plants reduce stress and clean the air of VOCs. NASA did [extensive research](#) on the air-purification capabilities of plants: "Both plant leaves and roots are utilized in removing trace levels of toxic vapors from inside tightly sealed buildings. Low levels of chemicals such as carbon monoxide and formaldehyde can be removed from indoor environments by plant leaves alone." Some of the [best plants for offices](#) include spider plants, peace lilies, Philodendrons and Boston ferns which do well in shady spots.

Plants even make you more productive. They reduce blood pressure and stress and can even improve memory. A [University of Michigan study](#) found that office plants can increase memory and retention levels by a whopping 20 percent.

While some of these efforts to green your office add to your costs, they will create a happier, more productive workforce with a reduction in sick days. A healthy workplace will also mean better staff retention rates and the joy of knowing that your office is contributing positively to the environment.

Source URL (modified on 09/28/2015 - 12:13):

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