



Australian Government

Comcare

HSR HELPER 3

Issue: complaints about the temperature in the office

As a health and safety representative (HSR), you have been elected by members of your work group to represent them in health and safety matters. Your role is not to fix health and safety problems in the workplace, nor are you expected to be an expert on work health and safety (WHS) issues.

Further information on your role as a HSR can be found in Comcare's [Health and Safety Representative Handbook](#) and Comcare's [HSR pocket guide](#). Please make sure you are familiar with the purpose of your role as a HSR.

This Helper does not contain every circumstance you may encounter, but is designed to give you some ideas about what you can do, and where to find further information.

WHAT COULD BE CAUSING THIS?

The obvious answer could be the temperature controls for the building, but that may not be the only solution to the problem.

Comfort level is a personal thing and people have differing levels of *thermal comfort*. Thermal comfort refers to a person's state in terms of whether they are feeling too hot or too cold. A range of environmental and personal factors contribute to a person feeling comfortable.

Thermal comfort is influenced by clothing, the job being undertaken, air temperature, humidity, air flow, the level of physical exertion, sun penetration, radiant temperature, the time of year and a number of building elements such as the which direction the building faces, window furnishings, window thickness, etc.

Any one of these factors could be causing workers to feel uncomfortable, and it may not be easy to work out which one or combination is the cause.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

As a HSR, it is not your job to establish the cause of workers feeling hot or cold. However, you can consult with management to help to resolve this health and safety issue.

You could check with workers to identify how many in your work group are experiencing similar problems in the building. You don't have to ask each individual; rather you want to get an idea of the number of people that are affected, their location, the extent to which they are experiencing discomfort and if they have any suggestions to remedy the problem.

You will then be better informed to discuss the issue with management.

To identify thermal comfort issues in office environments, ask the people working in the area a series of questions like:

- > Do you find it hot, cold, stuffy or draughty?
- > What time of day do you notice these conditions?
- > What effect do these conditions have on your health and or work?
- > How do you deal with it?
- > Where do you notice these conditions?

Ordinarily the first point of call for your manager will be the property management team to pass on the complaint to get the air-conditioning or other influences such as window coverings checked.

Whilst the air conditioning is checked you can help workers understand how to make themselves more comfortable. A number of actions you may implement can be found in the thermal comfort action table.

OTHER RESOURCES

[Preventing harm and hazards landing page](#)

[Managing the Work Environment and Facilities Code of Practice](#)

[Virtual Office](#)

Thermal comfort action table

Objects	Hazards	Considerations
Air flow	Workers feel tired and may make mistakes. High air flow can also lead to musculoskeletal issues as people feel cold (perceived as a draught).	Air flow needs to be addressed by a competent person. Raise the issue with management. Workers could wear long sleeve clothing to not feel the airflow on their skin.
Air temperature	Workers feel too hot or cold which can result in fatigue and errors in work. Cold can also lead to musculoskeletal issues. Optimal temperature for sedentary work is between 20 and 26 degrees celsius.	Air temperature needs to be addressed by a competent person. Raise the issue with management. Suggest workers wear layered clothing to either add or take off layers. If hot: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > have cool drinks, avoid caffeine > small personal fans help circulate air (ensure they are tested and tagged and approved for use before using) > block radiant heat from windows by closing blinds > consider relaxing formal dress code temporarily > the inner core of a building, away from windows may be a cooler place to work. If cold: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > add clothing layers > move around more (go to the printer).
Humidity	Low levels of relative humidity can lead to dry eyes and skin.	Humidity needs to be addressed by a competent person. Raise the issue with management. Eye drops may help ease symptoms as appropriate. Workers can consult a chemist. Moisturising cream can also assist with dry skin.

Objects	Hazards	Considerations
Atmospheric contaminants	Ozone may be released in small amounts by electrostatic photocopiers and printers. High levels of dust or other particles (for example, pollen, printer emissions) in indoor air. Harmful levels of airborne contaminants (for example, lead fumes, acid mist, solvent vapour) released by specific work processes.	This needs to be addressed by a competent person. Raise the issue with management. Some actions include > ensure that filters are of the correct type to remove expected contaminants and that filters are clean and are replaced regularly or as required > avoid continuous photocopying and collating or ensure adequate breaks are taken > consider moving printer and photocopiers to a designated printer room > ensure local control measures such as exhaust ventilation are in place to remove contaminants at the source.
Odours	Odours as well as being unpleasant can cause allergies in some workers. Perfumes, deodorants and even cooking smells can trigger allergies.	Are there exhaust fans in kitchens and are they used? Check if people have disclosed any allergies in order to minimise reactions, for example, is the kitchen a seafood free zone (to accommodate seafood allergies). In some cases a discussion with the person wearing the perfume/deodorant will be required to let them know other workers may be affected by the odour.
Disease control	Spread of harmful bacteria via central air-conditioning system (for example, Legionnaire disease).	Disease associated with air-conditioning needs to be addressed by a competent person. Raise the issue with management to ensure the risk is assessed and managed.

Is your workplace safe? Use the table following for a quick check.

Things to consider

Print out this table to get you started on what to look for in your workplace with regards to temperature. Where you identify an issue then a further risk assessment might be warranted. Report issues to your supervisor, manager or via your internal hazard reporting system.

	True	Requires follow up
Air-conditioning outlets are clean		
Air-conditioning outlets are open		
Air-conditioning outlets appear unobstructed		
Temperature sensors are located away from heat/cold source		
Air intake system are located away from sources of air contaminants (such as exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke and waste disposal units for example)		
Window coverings are installed (where necessary)		
Window coverings are fit for purpose (where necessary)		
Window coverings are used by workers to properly prevent heat from northerly and westerly facing windows (where necessary)		
Photocopy machines are located away from workers		
Workers do not experience drafts where they work		
Air vents are free from mould (could be indicated by discolouration)		
After hours air-conditioning switches are clearly marked		