



Australian Government

Comcare

HSR HELPER 1

Issue: complaints about the air quality in the building

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 function of a building's air-conditioning system is to draw in outside air, filter, heat, cool or humidify it and circulate it around the building. The system expels a portion of the air to the outside environment and replaces this expelled portion with fresh or outside air.

Air in offices may be contaminated by several different sources, including odours and micro-biological and chemical contaminants. In an office environment, the quality of the air is usually controlled through an air conditioning system.

Where air quality factors are identified as a problem, they should be measured by an appropriately qualified person. Filtration and the use of ventilation to dilute contaminants are the primary methods for improving indoor air quality in most buildings. Work processes that release harmful levels of airborne contaminants (for example, lead fumes, acid mist, and solvent vapour) will require specific control measures to remove them at the source, such as local exhaust ventilation.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

As a HSR, it is not your job to establish the cause of the poor air quality. 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 air quality issues in office environments, ask the people working in the area a series of questions such as:

- > Do you sneeze more than normal at work?
- > Do you feel too warm or too cold at work?
- > Do asthma symptoms increase?
- > What time of day do you notice these conditions?
- > What effect do these conditions have on your health and work?
- > 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 and ventilation systems checked.

OTHER RESOURCES

[Managing hazards landing page](#)

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

[Virtual Office](#)

[Officewise](#)

AS 1668.2-2012 *The use of ventilation and air-conditioning in buildings—Mechanical ventilation in buildings*

Indoor air quality action table

Objects	Hazards	Considerations
Air flow	High air flow can 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.
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 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> > 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? Have people disclosed what they are allergic to 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.
Mould, fungi and bacteria	Generally caused by dampness. Can cause allergies, asthma and sensitivities in workers.	Are there any areas of damp or evidence of water leaks? Flooding should be dried within 24 to 48 hours to prevent growth of mould.

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 air quality. 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 are unobstructed		
Air intake system are located away from sources of air contaminants (such as exhaust fumes, cigarette smoke and waste disposal units for example)		
Supplementary exhaust ventilation is provided (where necessary) for example, kitchens/photocopy/print rooms/showers etc		
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)		
Walls and ceilings are free from damp		
Dust is regularly removed from the workplace (via vacuuming and dusting)		
Air filters are maintained and fit for purpose (if something happens outside such as a fire, road repairs, construction etc and odours are noticeable within the building, then the filters might not be appropriate)		