‘Scents’ in the Workplace

A growing number of people are finding that exposure to certain scents in their workplaces are causing them to experience adverse health effects. Most fragrance chemicals consist of volatile organic compounds which are known to be respiratory irritants. Some people are so sensitive, that when they are exposed to certain scents, the lining of their noses actually swells due to engorged blood vessels. This is a reaction physicians refer to as non-allergenic rhinitis. Studies have also shown that shortness of breath or asthma-like symptoms may also be caused by exposure to certain scents.

There are thousands of chemicals commonly used in the production of grooming products to give them their pleasant scent. Because these formulas are considered trade secrets, manufacturers are not required to put specific content information on the label. Examples of these chemicals include acetone, alpha-pinene, alpha terpineol, benzyl acetate, benzyl alcohol, benzaldehyde, camphor, ethanol, and ethyl acetate. Symptoms may vary from person to person and depend on the type of exposure. Short term exposures may include irritated eyes, stuffy nose, sore throat, cough, chest tightness, dizziness and nausea. Longer term exposures may cause symptoms related to central nervous system depression such as prolonged weakness, chronic fatigue, chronic insomnia, confusion, lack of coordination, slurred speech, and migraine headaches.

Non-allergic rhinitis primarily affects adults and often causes year-round nasal congestion. Oral decongestants and corticosteroid or antihistamine nasal sprays may help control the signs and symptoms. The best approach is to seek medical attention. Make an appointment to see your physician to discuss these issues if you suspect your health is being affected by certain scents.

1. What do you do when you suspect that you are being adversely affected by a scent a co-worker/student is wearing?
   ○ Make an appointment to see your doctor to discuss the situation. Your doctor may offer you some options for management of this condition, if he/she can confirm that scented products are the cause.
   ○ Approach your co-worker/student in a positive manner and share your concerns about the scented product being worn in your area. Express how the scented product is affecting your health and request cooperation and understanding so the problem can be resolved.
   ○ If there is no resolution, contact your supervisor and advise him/her of the problem and ask for assistance in making appropriate accommodation.
   ○ If your supervisor does not assist you, you may wish to contact the Environmental Health and Safety Office and or Human Resources for advice or assistance.
2. What if you are approached about a scented product you are wearing?

- It is okay to feel surprised. Listen to the person in a non-defensive way. Attempt to understand the impact that the fragrance you are wearing is having on someone else’s health. Ask questions and show concern. Is it the amount you wear, the type? Be willing to reach a compromise to resolve the situation in a cooperative manner.

3. What if approaching a co-worker/student about not wearing a scented product in the area does not work?

- Talk to your supervisor about your concerns and explain what you have tried to do so far, in order to resolve the issue.
- Keep a diary of exposures and resulting symptoms both on and off the job. Include type, time, length of exposure, place of exposure, severity and length of resulting symptoms and how they were eventually alleviated.
- See your physician to get medical documentation indicating there is a link between your symptoms and the workplace and medical recommendations regarding possible solutions.

4. What should a supervisor do when receiving a complaint about a scented product problem?

- You should gather all information from the person(s) involved and discuss the concerns in a non-confrontational manner. Explain to your staff that certain health concerns have arisen regarding wearing scented products in your area. You should suggest that scented product not be worn in the area because of the negative effects that are occurring on the health of others.
- If the issue is not resolved, you may need to determine whether appropriate accommodation can be made for those persons affected.
- Inform and educate staff regarding their responsibility to cooperate with the accommodation process.
- Document accommodation request and respond. Set a review date.
- You may wish to contact the Environmental Health and Safety Office and or Human Resources for assistance in dealing with the concern.

The University of Manitoba considers the safety and health of all academic and support staff, as well as students and visitors to the University Campus, a priority. We take all reasonable measures to provide a safe and healthy environment for all of our staff, students and visitors. We appreciate everyone’s cooperation to minimize negative effects of scents/fragrances in our workplace.

Please be considerate of those working around you. Save those scented products for the weekends!

For further information, contact the EHSO at 474-6633 or e-mail EHSO@umanitoba.ca

References: Mayo Clinic. Com
University Alliance.com - Fragrance Sensitivity by Judy Tidwell
The University of Saskatchewan – Scent and Odour awareness