

Health and Safety Programs

Scent-Free Policy for the Workplace

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What is meant by scent-free?

When we talk about scents, we usually mean the smells or odours from ingredients and chemicals in cosmetics (perfume, make-up, shampoo, deodorant, etc.) or from other products such as air fresheners, cleaners, etc.

Unfortunately, there is no exact definition for scent-free, fragrance-free or unscented. Products labelled as unscented may actually contain ingredients that are used to mask or hide the smell of other ingredients. However, certain product composition statements are required, including:

Odour or fragrance

If a product formulation has been amended to add or change a fragrance, terms such as "fresh scent," "floral scent" or "lemon scent" that describe the resulting odour may be added by notification. The terms "fragrance-free" or "unscented" may be added by notification if the product is odourless or nearly odourless, and contains no odour-masking ingredients such as a perfume. The term "de-scented" may be added if the product contains an odour-masking ingredient.

(Source: [Regulatory Directive DIR2013-02, Notification/Non-notification](#). Health Canada)

While it is important to be aware of the lack of consistency when these terms are used by various manufacturers, the terms can still be a rough guideline when choosing products.

Can scents cause health problems?

When exposure to the ingredients or chemicals in scented products has been blamed for adversely affecting a person's health, some or all of the following symptoms are typically reported:

- headaches
- dizziness, light-headedness
- nausea
- fatigue
- weakness
- insomnia
- numbness
- upper respiratory symptoms
- shortness of breath
- skin irritation
- malaise
- confusion
- difficulty with concentration

The severity of these symptoms can vary. Some people report mild irritation, while others are incapacitated and/or must give up many 'normal' activities in order to avoid exposure (such as going to public places). As a consequence, some patients report feelings of depression or anxiety.

These reactions can be known as a condition called [environmental sensitivities](#). According to the Women's College Hospital:

"Environmental sensitivities (ES) describes a chronic condition whereby a person has symptoms when exposed to certain chemicals or other environmental agents at low levels tolerated by most people. The symptoms may range in severity from mild to debilitating.

ES has also been called multiple chemical sensitivity, chemical intolerance, environmental hypersensitivity, environmental illness, toxicant-induced loss of tolerance, and idiopathic environmental intolerance."

Exposure to the ingredients and chemicals in scented products, even in the smallest amounts, can also trigger other conditions, including allergic and asthmatic patients and those with other conditions (for example: mastocytosis, etc.). In these situations, the health effects can be severe.

What types of products are associated with environmental sensitivities?

Any product or chemical may be associated with environmental sensitivities. As stated by the [Public Service Commission of Canada](#), "Individuals with environmental sensitivities may have adverse reactions to foods, chemicals or environmental agents, singly or in combination. ... Environmental sensitivities include adverse reactions to specific allergens, such as cleaning agents, dust, perfumes or building construction materials."

This document focuses on sensitivities from scented products. Other documents that may be helpful include:

- [Indoor Air Quality - General](#)
- [Indoor Air Quality - Moulds and Fungi](#)

When dealing with a sensitivity issue in the workplace, be sure to address any and all possible causes.

What types of products contain scents?

Ingredients or chemicals used to produce scents are present in a very large range of products, including (note that these lists are not inclusive, and other products may trigger a response):

- shampoo and conditioners
- hairsprays
- deodorants

- colognes and aftershaves
- fragrances and perfumes
- lotions and creams
- potpourri
- industrial and household chemicals
- soaps, detergents, fabric softeners
- cosmetics
- air fresheners and deodorizers
- oils
- candles
- diapers
- some types of garbage bags

It is important to remember some products which claim to be 'scent free' may have only masked the scent by use of an additional chemical. Be sure to research the product carefully if using scented products around those who are sensitive.

Other triggers have been reported when an individual is exposed to:

- volatile organic compounds (e.g., gasoline, glues, paints, solvents, cleaning products, etc.)
- vehicle exhaust fumes
- pesticides
- pollen, moulds

I have read that there are carcinogens in fragrances. Is this true?

While it depends on the formula, there can be chemicals in fragrances and related products that have been determined to cause cancer in occupational settings or in laboratory animals.

The OSH Answers document [What makes chemicals poisonous?](#) has more information about the effects of chemicals on the body.

Are there any labelling requirements for products or cosmetics?

In some cases, yes, but these labelling requirements may not give you all the information you may need.

For example: Products like cleaners and air fresheners sold to the general public (in grocery or hardware stores) require consumer labelling only. These labels focus on immediate hazards such as corrosion (burns to skin/eyes), explosion, fire and poison. Only certain ingredients will be listed on the package or product. To find out all of the ingredients in the product, it may be necessary to contact the manufacturer directly.

Legislation from Health Canada requires labels on the outside packaging of cosmetics. These labels contain a list of all ingredients as used in the International Nomenclature of Cosmetic Ingredients system. This requirement provides consumers with the information they need to make informed choices about the cosmetic products they buy.

Are there laws in Canada that cover environmental sensitivities?

Yes. Accommodation is required under the federal and provincial Human Rights Acts. Please contact your local [human rights commission](#) for more information.

Employers should be aware that there are differences between individuals, and build these concepts into their workplace standards or policies as proactively as possible.

What steps should I take when implementing a scent-free policy in the workplace?

As with most workplace policies, be sure to consider the following:

- Conduct an assessment or survey of the employees to determine the extent of the issue. Collect opinions and suggestions at the same time to help you develop a policy appropriate to your workplace. (A sample survey is located at the end of this document.)
- Designate one key person to oversee the project and its development or create a committee with members representing all groups (employees, unions, management).
- Involve the health and safety committee or worker representative(s), and get management commitment from the beginning.
- Set and stick to deadlines for creating a draft policy, a review of the policy, and for implementation.
- Educate the employees. You may choose to include brochures or flyers in payroll envelopes, publish articles in company newsletters, or give presentations. In any case, the goal is to inform all employees of the health concerns related to scents and why the policy is needed.

- Be sure that all employees have been fully informed of the policy and that they know what they have to do before the policy becomes effective.
- Address any concerns the employees raise openly and honestly. Reinforce the idea that this policy is being implemented as a result of medical concerns - not merely because of a dislike for a certain smell.
- Make it clear that the policy applies to everyone (including visitors, patients, etc.).
- Make it clear that cooperation on the part of everyone is vital to the success of the policy. State clearly what a person may be asked to do if they are wearing scents (e.g., wash or remove with unscented wipes, change clothes, remain in a separate room, etc.)
- Search local legislation for any supporting documentation.
- Do not limit the scent-free policy to perfumes and colognes. As listed above, many building materials, and cleaning and personal care products also have scents or chemicals.
- Post a list of approved unscented products and where they are available locally.
- Review all safety data sheets (SDSs) for the products currently used and for those you are considering using. Make sure that the ingredients are acceptable. Remember that some products which claim to be scent-free may be using additional chemicals to mask smells instead of truly being unscented.
- Conduct trials in limited areas before purchasing large quantities of a product.
- Post notices that construction/re-modelling, waxing, shampooing, painting, spraying, etc. will be conducted one week beforehand so that affected personnel can make arrangements or have their duties modified during that time.
- Put the policy statement notice on all appointment cards, stationery, room booking notices, employment postings, etc.
- Decide on wording for 'Scent Free' signs and where the signs will be posted.
- Let everyone know that the policy will be reviewed and can be changed because of experience or new knowledge.

What is an example of a policy?

Policies should be based on the health concerns of employees. The policy must also apply uniformly throughout the company.

Sample: Scent-Free Policy

Policy:

Due to the health concerns arising from exposure to scented products, ABC Company Inc. has instituted this policy to provide a scent-free environment for all employees and visitors.

Definitions:

The use of scented products will not be allowed within the building at any time. In addition, all materials used for cleaning will be scent-free.

A list of locally available scent-free products is available from the health and safety office.

Procedure:

Employees will be informed of this policy through signs posted in buildings, the policy manual, and promotional materials, and will receive orientation and training.

Visitors will be informed of this policy through signs and it will be explained to them by their host.

This policy is effective on 01/01/18.

What should the posted notice say?

Signs should be posted near the entrances to the company building(s). In addition, statements on business cards, letterhead or promotional materials may be helpful if you receive a lot of visitors.

Examples include:

Some people who work at ABC Company report sensitivities to various chemical-based or scented products. We ask for everyone's cooperation in our efforts to accommodate their health concerns.

In response to health concerns, ABC Company has developed a Scent-Free Policy. Scented products such as hair spray, perfume, and deodorant can trigger reactions such as respiratory distress and headaches. Staff and visitors are asked to not use these products when reporting to this office.

ABC Company is a Scent-Free environment. Please do not use scented products while at work.

What are sample questions for an employee survey?

Sample questions include:

Have you ever been affected by scented products?

- If so, in what way?

Do you feel our company should offer programs encouraging employees to reduce the use of scents? (Yes, No)

How should our company become scent-free?

- Change from heavily scented products to non-scented or low-scented products?
- Offer awareness sessions to employees about the health concerns related to scented products.
- Offer other incentives? If so, describe.

Do you use any scented products such as shampoo, soap, hand lotions, perfumes, cologne, hair spray, or deodorant before arriving at work? (Yes, No, Not Sure)

Would you accept a Scent-Free policy for ABC Company? (Yes, No)

- If you are not willing to accept a Scent-Free policy, please describe why:

Do you have any additional comments?

Are there alternatives to a scent-free policy?

Try to identify the exact source of the problem, if possible. Reduce all emissions from building materials, cleaning products, etc.

Maintain good indoor air quality. Ensure that air is being replaced with fresh air and that scents are not being recycled throughout the building.

In some cases, it may be necessary to approach an individual who continues to use or wear scents. This request may come from human resources, the supervisor, management, the union, or according to terms of the policy and procedures as set by your organization. Note that the person suffering from environmental sensitivities does not have to be the one to approach the other individual. As with any human rights issue, it is not necessary for the affected individual to be identified.

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