

Scented Products and Scent Sensitivity

The purpose of this bulletin is to raise awareness of the potential health impact of airborne chemicals and scented products on indoor environmental quality and provide guidelines for addressing this issue at your worksite.

Why should we be concerned with scented products?

As more information comes to light on indoor environmental quality, it is clear that fragrances and scented products may in some cases be a hazard to human health.

The potential health impact of chemicals in scented products is magnified because people spend much of their time indoors. Studies estimate that 15-20 % of the general population reports some sensitivity to chemicals including smoke and fragrances and 4-6 % reports that chemical intolerance significantly affects their quality of life.

What is meant by scented products?

Most people on a daily basis use soap, shampoo, deodorant, cleaning and laundry products, hair spray, lotions, candles, incense, cosmetics and fragrances. Many of these products are scented and contain very low levels of chemicals called volatile organic compounds (VOCs) chemicals. These chemicals are released into the air and can cause a variety of health effects in some individuals. It is very common for persons reporting reactions to any of the above scented products to also report reacting to many other substances such as:

- building coatings or materials that give off VOCs (e.g. new paint or carpets)
- fume or exhausts (from cars, trucks, etc)
- cigarette smoke

What are the potential health effects of scented products?

Many scented products are respiratory irritants. They are also known triggers for asthma, allergies, migraines and people with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS). Even people that do not have pre-existing health problems can experience irritation to their eyes and upper airways, skin rashes, nausea and general discomfort.

What chemicals are used in scented products?

Thousands of chemicals are used to make fragrances and several hundred can be used in a single product. Due to the competitive nature of the fragrance industry, manufacturers were given the right to protect disclosure of their product ingredients through trade secret laws. As a result, little is known about the chemicals used in fragrances and their effect on human health.

Elk Island Public Schools has taken the issue of scented products seriously by developing administrative procedures and guidelines that raise awareness of this issue. All schools and departments are expected to take steps to reduce the impact of these products in their facilities.

Why is there a need for procedures and guidelines on the use of scented products?

1. To promote a safe, healthy and productive working and learning environment.
2. To increase awareness of the potential health effects of scented products so if problems arise they can be effectively resolved.
3. To reduce conflict and to promote cooperation and problem solving when issues arise.

What do you do when a person is using or wearing a scented product that is causing you problems?

Approach that person in a positive manner and share your concerns about the scented product being used or worn in your area. Express that the scented product they are using may be affecting your health. Ask for their cooperation and understanding in helping to find a mutual solution to the problem.

What if I'm approached about the scented product I'm wearing?

It is okay to feel surprised, hurt or taken aback. Listen to the person in a non-defensive way. Listen to the problems that the fragrance is producing on their health. Discuss openly about the scented product, and ask questions. Is it the amount or how and when it is used or applied? Is it the type of fragrance? Be willing to reach a resolution in a cooperative manner.

What if approaching a person about not wearing a scented product in the area does not work?

Talk to your supervisor about your concerns. Explain what you have tried to do in an attempt to resolve the issue.

What will my supervisor do when I express my concerns about the scented product?

Your supervisor should ask you questions about how exactly the scented product affects you. Be as specific as you can about your symptoms. Explain what you are doing to relieve the symptoms, what works and when do the symptoms clear up. Your supervisor should then discuss your concerns in a non-threatening manner with the person(s) involved, and explain the health concerns that have arisen regarding the use of a scented product in the area. Your supervisor may suggest that the scented product not be used or worn in the area or be used only under certain conditions.

What happens when the scented product continues to be used inappropriately even after the supervisor has spoken with the person using the scented product?

The supervisor will respond to each situation separately based on the specific circumstances involved. The supervisor should endeavor to resolve the issue in a way that is respectful of the feelings and dignity of all concerned. However, the supervisor's response will be guided by their overall responsibility to provide staff and students with a safe environment, which does not compromise their health or well being. Where necessary, a supervisor has the authority to direct that a scented product not be used in the facility or work area.

What can you do?

- Where possible use fragrance free products or if not available, scent-free products.
- Choose a lighter fragrance or wear no fragrance during the warmer weather as fragrance release increases with heat.
- Modify your use of scented products so that no one outside arms length away from you is aware of it.
- Choose low odour markers, art materials, chemicals and cleaning products that are fragrance free or non scented and emit low levels of volatile organic compounds.
- Avoid the use of room air fresheners and using or wearing strong perfumes/scents.
- Avoid burning, spraying or applying scented products in your building.
- Do not store perfumes or scented products at your workstation.
- If you have severe allergies to scent or chemical sensitivities notify your supervisor and co-workers and document on the EIPS Individual Allergy and Anaphylaxis Emergency Plan.

Additional Resources:

EIPS Draft Administrative Procedure Scent Sensitivity- Staff Connect http://eips.staffconnect.ca/document/view_procedure/896

Allergies and Anaphylaxis Information Page- Staff Connect http://eips.staffconnect.ca/document/view_document/1755

Learn more about the [health effects of fragrances](#) from the Canadian Lung Association

Developing a scent aware protocol for the workplace:
http://ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html?print

Additional information including signage is available from the Division OHS specialist at 780 417-8193.