

### *What's that smell?*

Fragrances have been used over the millennia for medicine, religion, romance, and simply to mask foul odors.

However, the composition of today's fragrances is quite different from that of the ancient pharaohs or the "perfumed court" of France's King Louis XV. Until the nineteenth century, scents were made from fragrant resins, flower essences, herbs, spices and other natural ingredients. Now, they are a complex mixture of natural materials and synthetic chemicals. Several hundred chemicals may be used to make a single scented product.

Chemicals used in fragrances can cause health problems such as shortness of breath, headaches and migraines, nausea, muscle pain, and cold-like symptoms. Asthma, emphysema, bronchitis, and allergies can all be adversely affected by the chemicals found in scented products. According to the Lung Association, one study found that 72 per cent of people with asthma had adverse reactions to perfumes.

In most workplaces there are employees who react to fragrances. Employees who like to wear perfume may not realize that they are triggering headaches, wheezing or allergic reactions in fellow employees.

The issue of sensitivity to perfumes in the workplace is complex. Ingredients of different fragrances vary, and allergic individuals may not be affected by all fragrances. In addition, many cleaning and personal care products also have scents. Further research is needed and is being undertaken.

In the meantime, what can workplaces do to protect employees with chemical sensitivities?

First of all, when an employee raises concerns about his or her reaction to perfumes, management should take the matter seriously. Assuming systems are in place to maintain good indoor air quality, the next step is to identify the exact source of the problem and assess its extent. If the source is one or two employees, management should let those employees know the effect their perfume has on other staff.

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