

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

I. PURPOSE

The Government of Saskatchewan is committed to ensuring workplace health, safety and wellness. Allergens and sensitivities present a health concern for some individuals in the workplace and addressing them requires a consistent approach.

This document has been approved by the Safety Champion Council to provide guidance to Executive Government workplaces on how to effectively address workplace allergy and sensitivity situations through awareness and respect in the workplace.

II. INTRODUCTION

Allergens and sensitivities can cause an adverse health response in some individuals when exposed to particular substances or elements in the environment and can trigger a number of different symptoms. Everyone has varying levels of sensitivity; the lower an individual's tolerance the more frequent and/or severe the health response. For some people, allergies and sensitivities are pre-existing and for others they develop over time.

Triggers can be natural, synthetic, biological, and chemical substances or elements. Triggers can be found anywhere in the environment, and when they occur from exposure at work, actions need to be taken to address the issues. The goal is to prevent or minimize triggers that can adversely affect employee's health in the workplace.

III. DEFINITIONS

Allergy: Exposure to a particular protein or antigen through inhalation, contact or ingestion can trigger immune system (allergic) health responses in some individuals. Responses are usually immediate and can vary from mild to fatal reactions. Diagnostic tests can determine the specific antigen, and medications or desensitizing treatments can help reduce health symptoms. Common allergens include food, nuts, dust, molds, grasses, animal dander, etc. Health responses may range from sneezing, runny nose, watering eyes, sinus congestion, wheezing, coughing, rash, and itching, to anaphylaxis or death.

Sensitivity: Exposure to even the smallest amounts of certain chemicals or environmental elements through inhalation or contact can trigger a health response similar to an allergic reaction. Responses are usually immediate and can vary from mild to significant reactions. Sensitivities are mistakenly associated with 'scents' because many scents contain triggering chemicals (e.g. perfume, make-up, shampoo, body lotions, deodorant, air freshener, laundry detergent, etc.). Health responses may include migraine headaches, dizziness or lightheadedness, nausea, fatigue, weakness, confusion, depression, anxiety, upper respiratory symptoms (e.g. coughing), shortness of breath and difficulty with concentration. Some people report mild irritation while others are incapacitated and may need to limit 'normal' activities in order to prevent exposure (e.g. avoiding public places or large gatherings of people). Having chemical or environmental sensitivity is a chronic health condition and is often referred to as Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

IV. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Everyone has a responsibility to build and maintain a healthy, safe and respectful workplace. It starts with awareness and effective communication, understanding the issue, and working together to reach required and/or mutually acceptable and respectful solutions. The goal is to prevent or minimize triggers that can adversely affect employee's health in the workplace.

All Employees

- Participate in learning to improve awareness and understanding as required.
- Co-operate with co-workers and manager/supervisor when addressing issues.
- Be respectful and refrain from using or bringing chemically scented products or identified allergens into the workplace.
- If approached by an employee or manager/supervisor regarding an allergen or sensitivity you may be triggering, respond supportively and respectfully and follow workplace procedures.

Affected Employee (*has allergy or sensitivity health responses*)

- Report allergy or sensitivity concerns to your manager/supervisor.
- Report incidents of workplace related adverse health responses to your manager/supervisor – work with manager/supervisor to complete an OHS Incident Form 101 and assist in addressing the issue.
- Provide supporting medical restrictions as required.
- Try to identify triggers by keeping a journal to track your health responses (e.g. where you were, what you noted, what was occurring just prior in the environment, what were your symptoms, etc.).
- Learn how to effectively communicate to others to reduce your exposure:
 - If the trigger is a fragrance, respectfully let the person know of your experience and ask if they would limit using the product/fragrance when they will be in contact with you or your environment; or, work with your manager/supervisor to address the issue with the individual on your behalf.
 - If the trigger is a chemical (e.g. cleaning product), work with your manager/supervisor and your ministry's designated Tenant Representative for your building to identify alternatives.
 - If the trigger is an allergen, work with your licensed health care provider to identify the antigen and obtain medical restrictions for your manager/supervisor to accommodate if necessary.
- If your sensitivity is triggered, cover your nose and mouth if you are exposed and get some fresh air.
- Talk to your doctor about any medications or treatments that may be helpful in reducing your health response – learn how to manage your health so it does not interfere with activities of daily living.
- If your allergy could require emergency first aid, develop a response plan and discuss with your manager/supervisor to ensure that those who may be involved are trained to respond to your health needs (e.g. EpiPen injection for severe allergic reaction, or administration of other types of medications, etc.).

Manager/Supervisor

- Ensure employees participate in required learning.
- When advised by an employee who has or is experiencing an allergic or sensitivity reaction, support them and work with them to address the issue – implement applicable actions as per Appendix A

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

“Managing Allergens and Sensitivities in the Workplace”.

- If it is a workplace related adverse health response work with the employee to complete OHS Incident Form 101 to determine solutions for addressing the issue.
- Seek consultation if required (e.g. local Occupational Health Committee, ministry’s safety professional, Human Resource Business Partner, etc.).

Occupational Health Committee/Representative

- Monitor concerns and provide recommendations.
- Assist the manager/supervisor with investigation of reported incidents, if applicable.
- Encourage all employees to promote respectful, and allergy and sensitivity free workplaces.

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

APPENDIX A

MANAGING ALLERGENS AND SENSITIVITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

The following are best-practices for addressing workplace allergens and sensitivities and could be implemented in your workplace as applicable.

1. Promote respect and integrity

All Employees:

- Exemplify the Public Service Core Value of Respect and Integrity in the workplace.
- Refrain from using or bringing chemically scented products (see Appendix B) or identified allergens into the workplace.
- Build and maintain healthy, safe and respectful workplaces and work together to reach required, and/or mutually acceptable and respectful solutions.

2. Education and awareness

All Employees:

- Participate in required learning (e.g. “Allergens and Sensitivities in the Workplace” training in Learn).

Manager/Supervisor:

- Continually promote awareness through safety talks, team/unit meetings, including safety as an agenda item, etc., of the impacts of allergens and sensitivities on the health of individuals in the workplace.
- Document employee participation in required learning to help ensure all employees participate and understand requirements.
- Ensure all clients and visitors are informed of how they can support an allergy and sensitivity free workplace prior to them attending the workplace.
- Display posters that identify what are, and how to support, respectful workplace approaches for sharing the air and work environment, and any established workplace procedures (see Appendix C).

3. Establish protected health zones

Working in public buildings and with the public, it can be difficult to enforce compliance with allergen and sensitivity preventive measures. General signage can be overlooked and people often do not understand what “fragrance-free” means. To protect specific employees, it may be necessary to establish ‘protected health zones’ in the workplace. These zones need to be monitored and all persons entering the zone shall be restricted from bringing known allergens or sensitivity triggering products into the area.

Manager/Supervisor:

- Clearly mark-off and indicate the boundaries of protected health zones, in addition to posters and other signage

4. Manage the environment

Manager/Supervisor:

- Remove products known to cause allergic and sensitivity health responses and replace them with an acceptable alternative.
- If allergens and sensitivities events arise, such as carpet cleaning, painting, renovations, etc., provide

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

employees with as much advance notice as possible. Discuss with employees how and if this may affect them and make accommodation arrangements during this activity if required.

Air quality testing is not recommended, and there is little to no benefit even when there is something specific being tested for. Basic air quality monitoring involves measuring temperature, humidity, oxygen and carbon monoxide levels only, and will not identify dusts, molds or chemicals that are in the air. Monitoring carbon dioxide levels can assist in determining adequate fresh air in a space.

5. Supporting and affected employee

Even though an individual may not know what specific chemical or antigen triggers a reaction, they can often identify what type of products or fragrances trigger their health response.

Manager/Supervisor/Employee:

- Collaborate on identifying solutions. Some options include:
 - Modify the employee's work environment to reduce exposure to triggers e.g. move desk away from the trigger, or high traffic spots where controlling exposure is difficult.
 - Identify operational solutions e.g. minimize personal contact by utilizing technology such as telephone and video conferencing.
 - Consult the ministry's designated Tenant Representative for your building to understand what options are available to promote air flow.
- Obtain medical documentation to support an accommodation process when required as per the [PS705 Employment Accommodation Policy](#). Consult your Human Resource Business Partner and/or ministry designated Ministry Contact for guidance.
- Communicate throughout your measures/progress so they are informed of what is being done on their behalf.

6. Monitor and address non-compliance

Manager/Supervisor:

- Continue to reinforce requirements by all employees once workplace procedures are put in place.
- Monitor "protected health zones" for compliance.
- If an issue arises:
 - Ensure individuals are re-educated on requirements – check records of training or previous interactions/discussions.
 - Request that the individual correct the issue as soon as reasonably practicable.
 - If necessary, contact your Human Resource Business Partner for guidance.

Resources:

Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, "Scent-free policy for the Workplace". Canadian Medical Association Journal, "Scent Free Policies Generally Unjustified". Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Organization. National Lung Association of Canada.

University of British Columbia, "Scents in the Workplace".

Wikipedia, "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity".

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
 Last reviewed: October 2021
 Next review: October 2022

APPENDIX B

SOURCES OF ALLERGENS AND SENSITIVITIES

- Allergens and sensitivities can cause an adverse health response in some individuals when exposed to particular substances or elements in the environment and can trigger a number of different symptoms. Everyone has varying levels of sensitivity; the lower an individual's tolerance the more frequent and/or severe the health response. For some people, allergies and sensitivities are pre-existing and for others they develop over time.
- Triggers can be natural, synthetic, biological, and chemical substances or elements. Triggers can be found anywhere in the environment, and when they occur from exposure at work there are steps everyone can take to reduce or eliminate them.
- As we get older, our immune system ages and we tend to develop allergies and sensitivities to elements in our environment. Our body may not be as capable to protect us from specific antigens, and any exposure subsequently elicits an allergic-type immune response.
- **Fragrances** are the odours that are emitted by volatile organic compounds (VOCs) found in chemicals. Chemicals are often added to a product to create a fragrance or to mask an odour of the product to make it more pleasing to consumers. Many of these chemicals are not regulated and may contain unknown ingredients that can present a health hazard.
- Not all allergens or sensitivities can be identified by a fragrance or a "scent". As a result, being 'scent-free' does not necessarily mean being allergen-free, trigger-free, or sensitivity-free.
- Not all odours (or 'scents') are harmful or elicit allergic-like symptoms. For example, natural body odors, food or cooking odors, natural oils, etc. These may have odors that some people find obnoxious, but they are not hazardous to your health in the manner that chemicals or allergens are.

Fragrances can be found in the following types of products and may trigger health symptoms in sensitive people:

TABLE 1: Types of Products that may cause Allergic or Sensitivity Health Responses

CATEGORY	TYPES OF PRODUCTS
<i>Personal-care products</i>	Perfumes, colognes, aftershaves, shampoos, soaps, body lotions, body sprays, deodorants, cosmetics, hairsprays, nail polish/remover, etc.
<i>Household items</i>	Air fresheners, candles, laundry detergents, dryer sheets or softeners, cleaning products, etc.
<i>Furniture</i>	Fabric, carpet, plastics, protective products, second-hand smoke on clothing and fabrics, etc.
<i>Food</i>	Eggs, nuts, gluten, spices, herbs, flavorings, etc.
<i>Animals</i>	Cats, dogs, horses, etc.
<i>Environment</i>	Mold, dust, grasses, flowers, plants, etc.
<i>Solvents</i>	Gasoline, diesel, paint, paint thinners, oil-based paint, insect/pest products, chlorine, etc.
<i>Smoke/vapors</i>	Smoke, tobacco, wood, oils, aerosols, etc.
<i>Building materials</i>	Wood, paint, insulation, drywall, glues/adhesives, etc.

Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace

Last revised: October 2021
Last reviewed: October 2021
Next review: October 2022

APPENDIX C

EXAMPLES OF POSTERS AND SIGNAGE

Printable posters are available on Staffroom under Occupational Health Safety/OHS Policies, Guidelines and Resources



Using unscented products makes workplaces accessible and safe.

Please do not wear scented products in this area.

For more information, visit the Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace on Taskroom.

taskroom.ca



[Fragrance-Free Workplace](#)



Scents vs. Fragrances



Scents are all around us - coffee brewing, food and cooking smells, etc. These scents can be unpleasant to some people, but are typically not harmful or do not cause allergic or sensitivity reactions.



The chemicals used in scented products are the real culprits. It's these chemicals that can make people sick, especially those with allergies, scent sensitivities and other respiratory ailments.



Limiting your use of chemically-scented products at work helps make our workplace accessible and safe for everyone.



For more information, visit the Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace on Taskroom.

taskroom.ca

Saskatchewan 

[What the difference between Scents and Fragrances](#)

We Share the Air



Please do not wear artificially scented products in this area.



Chemicals in artificially scented products can make people sick, especially those with allergies, scent sensitivities and other respiratory ailments.



Reactions to some chemical scents can be mild to fatal.



Using unscented products make workplaces accessible and safe.



Everyone is responsible to ensure a healthy a safe workplace.



For more information, visit the Guidelines for Addressing Allergies and Sensitivities in the Workplace on Taskroom.

taskroom.ca

Saskatchewan 

[We Share the Air](#)