**What is sick building syndrome?**

This is the name given to the phenomenon when people who regularly occupy a building (like office workers) experience various troublesome symptoms, mainly when they spend time there. The symptoms tend to be flu- or allergy-like, and may include headaches, burning or itching eyes, stuffy nose, sneezing, coughing, sore throat, tight chest, dry or itchy skin, dizziness, difficulty concentrating, nausea and fatigue. People prone to asthma or allergies may find that their usual symptoms worsen while in the suspect building.

**What causes it?**

There are some well-established prime suspects.

The syndrome is thought to be the result of poor indoor air quality, caused in turn by inadequate ventilation, faulty or poorly maintained air conditioning systems, and a wide array of indoor chemical pollutants.

Although separate smoking and non-smoking zones are now a legal requirement in workplaces, air contaminated with smoke can spread if it is not contained and if ventilation is poor.

Moulds and bacteria thrive in poorly maintained air conditioning systems or in dirty, damp patches, such as in bathrooms or around leaky pipes. When organisms grow in ventilation systems, they can spread throughout a building.

Polluted outdoor air may also enter a building and add to indoor pollution. For example, pollutants from motor vehicle traffic, from garages nearby or beneath the building, and from the building’s own exhaust vents, can enter through poorly located air intake vents and other openings. Carbon monoxide gas, a component of car exhaust, is one of the common pollutants that can seep into offices from outside. It can cause fatigue, headache, dizziness and nausea. If inhaled over long time periods, it may affect co-ordination and worsen heart problems.

**Nursing a sick building back to health**

Tracking down the source of a building’s malaise often involves serious detective work, and may require the services of a health and safety and/ or air quality expert. However, the following simple measures should help relieve the problem, if not entirely neutralise the cause:

*Ban tobacco smoke*

Campaign for a smoke-free building. Failing that, make sure your workplace complies with the exact letter of the law: no more than 25% of the space can be designated a smoking area. That area needs to be physically isolated from the rest of the interior i.e. it needs to be enclosed and the smoky air vented to the exterior of the building.

*Get air flowing*

Air circulation in offices can be impeded by partitions. Try raising the base of these further off the floor, or occasionally moving their position. If you work in an older building without air conditioning, keep windows and doors open whenever possible, and use or enquire about installing ceiling fans. Standing fans also help pull in fresh air from outside and keep it circulating.

*Get out!*

Try to get out of the office on your lunch breaks – preferably somewhere with good natural ventilation. Even a walk round the block should help; if your building is “sick”, then chances are the indoor pollution is worse than that outside.

*Reduce potential indoor air pollution sources*

If construction or renovation is planned in a section of your building, motivate to have this part left unoccupied for a few weeks (the longer the better), or at least for it to be thoroughly ventilated. This helps reduce exposure to any chemical pollutants from new building materials. Also ask if cleaning can be done at times of low building occupancy.

- Olivia Rose-Innes, EnviroHealth, Health24, updated July 2009.