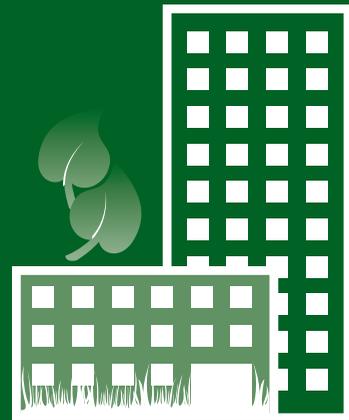




Creating Healthy Apartments: What You Need to Know



Centre for Equality Rights in Accommodation



Materials used in rental apartment buildings, housing co-operatives and condominiums release pollutants into the air that can be very unhealthy. These pollutants – even in small quantities – can lead to serious health problems for children, pregnant women, people with weakened immune or respiratory systems, and those living with environmental sensitivities.

This pamphlet provides information on some of the products and materials that pollute indoor air – and what you can do to make your home healthier.

Why do Buildings Make People Sick?



Hazardous volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other toxic substances are released into the air by many common building and maintenance materials, such as cleaners, paints, glues, particle board and plywood, carpeting, and air fresheners. Residents and staff also contribute to the problem by smoking and using scented personal care and laundry products. Major repairs and renovations further pollute the air, as can ventilation systems that are not working properly.

WHAT ARE VOCs?

Volatile organic compounds are chemicals that are released as gases (“off-gas”) from a large variety of substances, both solid and liquid. Many VOCs are toxic and have been found to have short and long-term health consequences. The US Environmental Protection Agency found levels of common VOCs to be between two to five times higher indoors than outdoors.

What are Environmental Sensitivities?

Indoor air quality should be a concern for everyone. Some people, however, are extremely sensitive to air pollution. Many Canadians suffer from environmental sensitivities, a poorly understood disorder (or set of disorders) that can make people very sensitive to low levels of contaminants in the air or water.

Having severe environmental sensitivities can be extremely debilitating, making it very difficult to find and maintain housing and employment. People may turn into prisoners of their own homes. Symptoms vary from individual to individual, but can include headaches, shortness of breath, hives, nausea, abdominal pain, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure, difficulty concentrating, and anxiety and depression.

Primary treatment often focuses on avoiding contact with substances which lead to these symptoms. Healthy housing is critically important for people with environmental sensitivities.

What Can Residents Do?

As a resident, you have a large role to play in making your home healthy.

Don't smoke in the building

If you smoke, do it outside and away from the building whenever possible.

Avoid scented personal care and laundry products

The chemicals and fragrances in hair spray, deodorant, soap, shampoo, perfume and cologne, laundry detergent and fabric softeners can make hallways, laundry rooms and other common areas toxic for many residents. Scent-free, non-toxic personal care and laundry products are now widely available in supermarkets and drug stores.

Clean your apartment with unscented, low or no-VOC cleaning products

Products used to clean carpets, floors, kitchens, bathrooms, windows, and walls are often scented and release harmful VOCs. Healthier home cleaning products are now readily available at most large grocery, home or hardware stores. You can find a list of less toxic products at www.lesstoxicguide.ca. Microfibre mops and cloths are also good alternatives to chemical cleaning products.

Don't use scented odour controlling devices

Avoid air 'fresheners', carpet 'fresheners' and other scented odour-controlling devices. Instead, remove odours through ventilation and cleaning with unscented products.



Use low or zero-VOC paints and stains in your apartment

Paints and varnishes are solvent-based and emit harmful VOCs. Use readily available low or no-VOC water-based paints and stains.

Avoid composite wood products containing formaldehyde

Particle board, plywood and other composite wood products used in furniture and cabinets often release toxic formaldehyde into the air. In addition, pine and cedar have strong scents that can trigger symptoms in people with environmental sensitivities or allergies.

Furniture and cabinets made with hardwood, metal or glass are better choices.

Also try to avoid furniture with rubber/vinyl exteriors and fabric protectors that emit harmful VOCs, and foam padding that can break down and release chemical dust.



Don't let mold grow!

Keep an eye out for water damage and mold. If you see anything, alert your building manager or superintendent right away. Make sure any mold is cleaned quickly with a less-toxic product, such as Tri-Sodium Phosphate (TSP). TSP can be found in most hardware stores. **Do not use chlorine bleach.**

What Can Your Building Management Do?

There is only so much that you, as a resident, can do to improve the air in your building. In addition to taking the steps described above, you may have to work together with your building management to make your apartment healthier.

All of the approaches described above should be used by your building management.

Here are some additional strategies:

Ensure repair/renovation work is contained and vented

Repairs or renovations can lead to poor air quality within a building. Your building staff or contractors should:

- Install barriers to ensure that dust and other contaminants stay within the work area

- Use a HEPA (High Efficiency Particulate Arrestor) air scrubber or large vacuum exhausting out a sealed window to remove dust and fumes
- Provide adequate notice to residents before any renovations or repairs take place
- Recognize that, for some residents, air quality problems associated with renovating their units may outweigh the benefits of the renovations. Sometimes it is better **not** to renovate.

Avoid carpeting and vinyl flooring

Carpets can have a big impact on air quality because the fibres, underpadding, latex binding and various treatments all release VOCs. They also absorb pollutants and collect dust, mold and mites. Similarly, vinyl tiles, laminate flooring and their associated glues release VOCs. Better options are ceramic tile, brick, polished concrete or hardwood.

Avoid natural gas appliances and self-cleaning ovens

Residents with environmental sensitivities can rarely tolerate natural gas appliances such as gas stoves. Self cleaning ovens can also be a problem.

Ensure the Building has Proper Ventilation

Good indoor air quality requires proper ventilation. Bad air needs to be flushed out and replaced by fresh air. Building management should:

- Maintain (and where necessary upgrade) corridor ventilation systems to ensure adequate positive air pressure
- Ensure kitchen and bathroom exhaust fans are working properly
- Ensure individual apartments are properly sealed to reduce air transfer between units
- Seal off ground floor commercial units from the rest of the building
- Maintain (and where necessary upgrade) indoor garage ventilation systems and install an 'air barrier' system to prevent air from leaking into and out of the garage.

Where possible, have an “unscented” laundry machine or laundry room

Communal laundry facilities in buildings can be unusable for residents with environmental sensitivities or similar conditions because of the laundry detergents, fabric softeners and other products used by residents. Where a resident's health is being affected by laundry products, your building management should try to provide separate laundry facilities or allow the resident to have his/her own machine.



Have a scent-free policy

Your building management should promote a scent-free environment, including instituting a scent-free policy for staff and contract workers.

If there is more than one elevator in the building, it could be designated “scent-free”.

The Law and Healthy Apartments



While creating healthy housing is a worthwhile goal for obvious reasons, it is also the law. Under Ontario's *Human Rights Code*, landlords and co-operative and condominium boards of directors have a legal obligation to respond to the needs of residents with disabilities, such as those with environmental sensitivities. If a resident requests changes to a building's structure or practices due to a disability, the housing provider must accommodate this request unless to do so would be almost impossible financially, or it would cause significant health or safety concerns. In the case of a person with environmental sensitivities, this could mean changing to less-toxic, unscented cleaning products, promoting a “scent-free” environment with residents and staff, and establishing new procedures with respect to renovations, maintenance and cleaning.

For more information these legal obligations, see the Ontario Human Rights Commission's *Policy on Human Rights and Rental Housing and Policy and Guidelines on Disability and the Duty to Accommodate*, available online at: www.ohrc.on.ca.



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