

Air Quality Odors Affecting Your Workplace

Problem odors indoors are among the most common complaints reported to the Office of Environment, Health & Safety (EH&S). Learn about possible sources and what you can do about them.

If you are experiencing a persistent, alarming, or illness-inducing odor, please contact EH&S (642-3073) for assistance. Consult University Health Services Urgent Care (642-3188) if serious symptoms arise.

Most odor complaints affect only a single room or suite. The odor source is usually in the room with the smell. Often the smell seems to be coming from the ventilation. This is because the air moving from the supply vent pulls room air along with it, giving the impression that the ventilation system is the cause or source of the odor.

Common Sources

- Dry sink and floor drain traps are the most common odor sources in campus buildings, especially in labs. The odor is often a rotten egg or sewer smell, but is sometimes described as a chemical or solvent odor. The smell comes and goes and may be very strong at times. The negative ventilation pressure of a laboratory is more likely to draw up odors from a drain than an office (that typically has positive ventilation pressure).
 - o Sink and floor drains are equipped with a trap, usually in the form of a U-shaped pipe. Drain liquid is trapped in the bend and forms a seal, preventing sewer gases from escaping out of the drain into your area. Dry traps are often found in cup sinks (those little sinks in the middle of lab benches), floor drains, and sinks covered by equipment.
 - o You can prevent or eliminate dry trap odors by running water in all sinks and drains. Consider having someone flush drains with a ½ gallon of water about once a month. Or consider pouring in 2 tablespoons of mineral oil to float on drain water to minimize the trap water from evaporating.
- Lost or forgotten food odors tend to be localized in a room and remain fairly constant over the course of a day (as opposed to dry traps which can vary greatly in intensity over short periods of time). Before you contact EHS please search your area by looking in drawers, behind furniture, and in waste baskets. Dispose of odorous or rotten food in an outdoor trash container.
- Odors entering building air intakes are distributed via the mechanical ventilation system. The smell will be apparent in many rooms or an entire floor



or wing of a building. Common odors include exhaust from a vehicle idling nearby, or from work being performed on or near the building's air intakes or inside the air handler rooms.

- o Ask drivers parked near your building's fresh air intake to turn off their engines. If it's a recurring problem, contact the building manager or EH&S.
- o Maintenance or construction work may introduce odors from machines, equipment or chemicals that can be distributed by the ventilation system. Notify EH&S if you suspect a work practices is affecting the indoor air quality.
- Primer, paint and new furnishings odors can be localized or distributed via the mechanical ventilation system. Campus projects use low-odor materials in most cases, but trace odors may still be detected by the nose after work is completed, and may take some time to dissipate. Maximize air circulation with continuous HVAC operation, opening windows, or running fans until odors are satisfactory.
- Tobacco smoke from cigarettes, cigars, and other tobacco products occasionally waft into indoor spaces. Until the University becomes a smoke-free workplace on January 1, 2014, outdoor smokers should be at least 25-feet away from doors, windows and air-intakes. EH&S and University Health Services can assist with building signage and communication regarding smoking.

If your efforts to identify or control the odor are insufficient, contact EH&S at 510-642-3073 for assistance.

