

## Indoor Air Quality *Breathe Easy*

Indoor air quality (IAQ) describes how indoor air can affect a person's health, comfort, and ability to work. Poor indoor air quality can cause headaches, dry eyes, nasal mucus, nausea, and fatigue. People who already have respiratory conditions, such as asthma, have a greater chance of having these symptoms or may experience an exacerbation of their condition.

Factors that affect IAQ include temperature, humidity, ventilation, airborne particulates, mold, and chemicals, such as carbon monoxide (CO) from fireplaces and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from paint or new carpet. While some of these components are inherently present everywhere and cannot be removed from the work environment, indoor air quality is considered adequate when air contaminants are below established regulatory limits or best practice guidelines. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) recognizes that good IAQ contributes to a favorable work environment and that worker productivity significantly increases when air quality is adequate.

Northwestern has more than 200 buildings, ranging from those built in the 19th century to newly built, state-of-the-art computer-controlled building systems. Proper building operations, such as maintaining adequate ventilation, and routine maintenance, such as changing filters in air handling units, are critical to ensuring healthy IAQ no matter the age of the building. Additionally, following guidelines set by the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers (ASHRAE) for temperature, humidity, and carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) should provide maximum comfort levels for building occupants.

### Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team

- **Preparation is Key:** Keep the topic relevant to your work. With your team, review common IAQ issues in your workplace and potential long-term changes to improve conditions.
- **Stay Positive:** Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe workplace, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.
- **Share a Story, Ask for a Story:** Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.



Risk Management has developed an [Indoor Air Quality Program](#) to establish standard procedures for the management of IAQ concerns in your work environment. If necessary, Risk Management can conduct IAQ investigations in your workspace, which may include taking temperature and humidity readings or monitoring for dust or chemicals such as VOCs.

Investigation results are compared to OSHA standards and ASHRAE guidelines. Personnel experiencing health-related concerns will be asked to complete an [IAQ Survey](#) to aid in the investigation of the work area.

### IAQ Reporting Procedures

- **Immediate issues** posing a threat to personal health or safety should be reported to University police dispatch at 847.491.3254.
- **Physical comfort concerns**, such as temperature or humidity, air movement/drafts or stale air, dust, mold, or unusual or unidentifiable odors, should be reported to FM customer service at 847.491.5201 (Evanston) or 312.503.8000 (Chicago).
- **Health-related concerns** or symptoms should be reported to Risk Management at 847.491.4936.

### Fresh Solutions to a Stale Problem

General guidelines to maintain acceptable indoor air quality in your workplace include:

- Report leaks immediately to Facilities Management customer service
- Store food correctly and dispose of garbage quickly
- Properly water and maintain office plants
- Make sure air supply vents are not blocked by furniture or equipment
- Do not smoke inside buildings or within 25' of building entrances or ventilation intakes

**Learn more:** For additional information, visit the [EPA's Indoor Air Quality website](#).

## Safety at Home – Harvest a Healthy House

**Did you know?** Most Americans spend up to 90% of their time indoors making indoor air quality an important part of their health. Indoor air pollution sources that release gases into the air are a primary cause of indoor air quality problems in homes. Common causes for indoor air pollution include poor ventilation, the burning of toxic candles, use of air fresheners, chemical laden household cleaners and more. By following the tips below, you can prevent harmful exposure to yourself and your family:

- **Install carbon monoxide (CO) alarms.** CO is an odorless, colorless, and toxic gas and can kill you before you are aware it is in your home. Common sources of CO include gas stoves, leaking chimneys and furnaces, and tobacco smoke.
- **Keep your home and car smoke-free.** Secondhand smoke contains more than 7,000 substances, several of which are known to cause cancer in humans or animals. EPA estimates that exposure to secondhand smoke causes approximately 3,000 lung cancer deaths per year in nonsmokers.
- **Control moisture to prevent mold.** Keep indoor humidity below 50%. Use air conditioners in warm, humid weather. If you use a humidifier in winter, clean and disinfect it often.

### For Additional Information

Please contact [Gwen Butler](#), Director of Environmental Health and Safety, at 847.491.4936.