



SICK BUILDING SYNDROME

This information sheet tells you what Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) is, what the likely causes are, and what can be done to resolve the problems caused by SBS.

Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) is a growing concern for many UNISON branches. It is estimated by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) that 30% - 50% of new or recently refurbished buildings cause some form of SBS, and that, in the worst cases, up to 85% of the occupants are suffering symptoms.

This information sheet tells you what SBS is, what the likely causes are, and what can be done to resolve the problems caused by SBS.

WHAT IS SICK BUILDING SYNDROME?

SBS has been recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) since 1982. It is characterised by a significant proportion of those working in a particular building complaining of a range of cold or flu type symptoms and tends to affect office buildings more than other types of workplace.

With SBS the symptoms are much more common among the occupants of the particular building than in the general population and are suffered less or disappear when people are away from the building over a weekend or holiday.

Unfortunately the term SBS is often used for other, more specific, problems; in particular simple comfort problems caused by lack of heating, or poor air conditioning, or low humidity. In addition, SBS is not a

single-related illness where there is a specific cause such as stress (where often the symptoms are very similar), a bacterial infection such as legionnaires disease, or where the office has been built on contaminated land.

These are all specific health problems, which should be dealt with separately through a risk assessment.

Symptoms

With SBS, there are a wide range of different symptoms, but because different people react differently they are often not identified as SBS. Some people will feel no ill effects while others, working in exactly the same conditions, will get quite serious illnesses.

Usually there are four types of symptoms associated with SBS. These are: skin problems, breathing problems (including sore throats, persistent coughs, blocked noses, and sinusitis), muscular and joint problems (especially stiff shoulders and back ache), and what are usually called neurological problems (such as tiredness, head aches, and digestion disorders).

However, most of these symptoms could result from any one of a number of causes including stress or flu. This makes the role of the UNISON branch more crucial in getting evidence of both the cause and the

extent of the problem.

Causes

The exact causes of SBS are not known. In offices, it is likely to involve a combination of physical, environmental, and job-related factors. These may include:

- poor ventilation and air conditioning systems;
- indoor air pollutants such as ozone from photocopiers and laser printers, chemicals released from carpet adhesive, cleaning fluids, solvents, and tobacco smoke;
- poor cleaning and maintenance;
- noise;
- bad layout of offices and work stations within the building; and
- a poor working environment due to bad lighting, air movement, or temperature control.

These can be made worse by the high number of computers in use in modern offices which generate a lot of heat, and the fact that staff are unable to have any control over their working environment and work content. SBS is also more likely where staff are employed in routine low paid jobs.

It is very difficult to identify SBS through any standard tests, as there are so many potentially different causes. In addition, where pollutants are a factor they are likely to be present at levels where detection is very difficult.

WHAT BUILDINGS ARE AT RISK?

Although any building could have SBS, research has shown that it is more common in open plan offices with large windows and a high level of synthetic materials.

The WHO list the most common characteristics of SBS as being:

- a building built during the 1960s or later;

- air conditioning with cooling capacity;
- lighting which causes high glare and/or flicker;
- low level of user control over ventilation, heating, and lighting;
- large areas of soft furnishing;
- a large amount of open shelving and filing;
- new furniture, carpeting, and painted surfaces;
- poor standards of maintenance and repair;
- insufficient cleaning;
- high temperature or excessive variations during the day;
- very low or very high humidity;
- chemical pollutants such as tobacco smoke, ozone, or volatile organic compounds;
- dust particles or fibres in the air; and
- computer display screens.

A building that meets the definition of sick building syndrome is likely to have most, or a significant number, of these characteristics.

THE LAW

The Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) says that an employer has a duty to maintain a safe system of work.

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 states that a safe system of work should be achieved through risk assessment. This means that the employer must look at any risk and remove or reduce it to an acceptable level. This includes any causes of SBS. Even if pollutants are below legal maximums, if they are believed to be causing ill health, employers have a legal duty to seek to remove them.

The Workplace Health, Safety, and Welfare Regulations 1992 include a code of



practice which lays down minimum standards on lighting, temperature, and air quality. However, most of these standards are so general as to be of little practical use. For instance, there is no maximum temperature at work.

SOLUTIONS TO SICK BUILDING SYNDROME

SBS would not be a problem if architects and designers took into account the needs of workers when designing buildings.

Good air conditioning (including proper maintenance), replacing old photocopiers and laser printers, replacing florescent lighting, and redesigning workplaces; can often help overcome many of the problems. In some cases, increasing the levels of cleaning can also make a difference. Although, this may also lead to an increase in the amount of cleaning chemicals used. It is preferable to use low maintenance and low cleaning alternatives. Note however, that this can have implications for the jobs of UNISON members involved in cleaning.

Revisiting ideas of open plan offices is also important. The WHO recommends no more than 10 workstations in any room and this is standard practice in most North European countries.

However, there is not always a simple solution to SBS and management must monitor the office environment and sickness records to ensure that any solutions they come up with are working.

Often employers will not have the expertise to be able to resolve SBS on their own and should use external advisers to identify the problems and suggest solutions. However, as the HSE says “the easiest way to highlight problems is to ask the staff themselves.” They will generally be the first to know about temperature controls, lighting, noise levels, stuffiness, fumes, and tobacco smokes.

WHAT CAN SAFETY REPRESENTATIVES DO?

SBS highlights the importance of trade unions being involved in health and safety.

With SBS, some individuals will experience symptoms while their work colleagues are perfectly healthy. This means they may often think that the cause of their illness lies with themselves. Even if they complain to management, their bosses are unlikely to take any action because they will not see any work related reason for the illness.

Only by looking at the whole picture, throughout the building, can SBS be identified.

Some UNISON branches have monitored sickness records and complaints to identify a pattern, which has shown up the existence of SBS. They have then been able to take up the issue with management.

In one case, SBS had been an ongoing problem for a number of years, and after a long running battle, the branch asked the HSE to investigate. They ordered the employer to undertake a programme of works to improve conditions, including introducing air movement systems and windows that open.

Carrying out an office survey is a good means of obtaining information and raising awareness amongst the staff. If the survey shows that there is a problem; management can be asked to do a full workplace inspection looking at areas like: air quality, temperature, humidity, ventilation, cleaning, and maintenance.

FURTHER INFORMATION

UNISON has produced a general guide for safety representatives as well as booklets on health and safety law, risk assessments, and stress. These are available through your branch.

In addition, there are further information sheets on temperature, photocopiers, and



eye testing; which may be of use where there is the possibility of SBS. These are available from the UNISON, Health and Safety Unit, 1 Mabledon Place, London WC1H 9AJ. Email: healthandsafety@unison.co.uk

The HSE has produced guidance for employers, How to deal with Sick Building Syndrome (1995) which you can ask your employer to buy. Telephone HSE Books on: 01787 881165. In addition, employers should be asked to get a copy of Sick Building Syndrome: the invisible burden on office workers, from Industrial Relations Services. This is probably the best and simplest guide for managers, but it costs £25.

