

# Owning and managing a healthy building

**Q:** Taft, I have a longtime tenant who said that right after we installed new carpeting in her unit, she was having trouble breathing and was getting really depressed. It's brand new, so there can't be anything wrong with it, can there? What should I do?

**A:** Glad you brought this up. Indoor environmental health is an issue cropping up more and more in our high-tech, chemicalized environment. The first function of a place to live is to provide shelter from the cold, rain, snow and heat. But despite our best intentions, sometimes living spaces can be unhealthy for the occupants, and as owners or managers we should be aware of indoor health issues such as these:

### Secondhand Smoke

The issue of secondhand smoke has grown with public awareness of its dangers. As long as you clearly communicate and are consistent with how you approach this problem in the lease, you have the authority to restrict smoking inside an apartment that you own. There are multiple ways to handle it, including moving the smoker to a different unit that isn't close to anyone else who will object to the smoke, or requiring the smoker to smoke only outdoors. Check out a helpful Michigan-based website, [www.tcsg.org/sfelp/apt\\_condofact.htm](http://www.tcsg.org/sfelp/apt_condofact.htm), which has an extensive discussion of the issue and many good ideas. Knowing how to handle the matter can mean keeping, or losing, a good tenant.

### Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)

Much less well-known than the problem of secondhand smoke, MCS is a complex medical syndrome characterized by debilitating chemical sensitivities. People who are chemically sensitive are made sick by exposure to chemicals found in many common products such as pesticides, perfumes, tobacco smoke, new carpets, air "fresheners," new paint and building materials, and many cleaning and laundry products.

Most of these chemicals will make everyone sick at high levels, but for chemically-sensitive people, exposures to even small amounts of the substances can cause symptoms. Some chemically-sensitive people are mildly affected while others have more severe life-threatening reactions. Symptoms experienced by people with MCS may include headaches, lack of concentration, nausea, diarrhea, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, dizziness, difficulty breathing, irregular heartbeat, and seizures.



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The Social Security Administration and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development recognize MCS as a potentially disabling condition. It is covered under the Americans with Disabilities Act on a case-by-case basis. Since this column cannot offer legal advice, consult with an attorney on specific circumstances to ensure that you are in compliance.

Steps you can take to avoid chemical sensitivities and create a healthier environment for all your tenants:

- Apply natural pest control methods instead of toxic pesticides.
- Use low- or zero-VOC (volatile organic compounds) paint instead of solvent-based stains and transparent finishes.
- Install newly-developed nontoxic carpeting instead of carpeting with traditional glues and backing.
- Use natural and unscented cleaning, laundry and sanitizing products.
- Encourage tenants to avoid wearing perfume, cologne and scented personal care products in common areas.
- Avoid air "freshener" sprays, incense and fragrance-emitting devices.

So as a landlord or manager, you're providing more than the proverbial roof over the heads of your tenants. You're giving them a healthy place to live!

Until next time,  
*Taft*