

City of Tumwater - Fragrances in the Workplace

It has been City practice to maintain a scent free workplace. City employees are asked to refrain from using perfumes or other scented products while at work. These chemicals can cause a serious health risk to people with sensitivity to them. Questions about this practice should be directed to Human Resources.

Background

When we think of chemicals in the workplace, we often think of industrial type chemicals like solvents and 5-gallon drums of toxics. There are other chemicals in our workplaces that most of us don't think twice about—these are chemicals that are in our colognes, perfumes, hand lotions, laundry soaps, body washes, and hair products.

The City has employees who are highly sensitive to some of those chemicals. While you may know that no one in your immediate area is sensitive, it is likely that you will be near others who are sensitive at some point.

An important point to remember is that it is usually the chemicals used in the product that can cause a reaction, not the fragrance itself. Even products labeled “scent free” have those chemicals. For those who are sensitive to the chemicals, the physical effects of their illness can range anywhere from irritating to life threatening. It is a very real and serious medical situation for some employees and customers.

In order to establish a workplace that is safe for all of our employees, I am taking this opportunity to provide some information so you can become more aware of the chemicals in the products that you might be using.

Some things you may or may not already know:

- Just one perfume can contain more than 500 chemicals. Expensive products are just as likely as cheap ones to contain synthetic chemicals. And words like “hypoallergenic” “natural scent” “floral” and the names of various flowers don't mean that you can trust the product under the label.
- Your sense receptors become resistant to the fragrances they are used to smelling. The same amount of cologne/perfume that you applied before is no longer noticed by you. That's why you tend to put on that little bit “extra” so that you notice it. However, someone who hasn't become resistant to that fragrance smells the regular dose, plus the “extra” dose. Often, from several feet away.
- Even “unscented” may actually mean that a masking fragrance has been added to the product to disguise the smell of certain ingredients. Products that are used to “mask” another odor, also have chemicals. Remember, it's the chemicals, not the odor. Often the original odor is not offensive, but the chemicals in the masking agent are.

- Cosmetics have exemptions from labeling laws. They can state they are “fragrance free” even if they aren’t. Again, even “fragrance free” products have chemicals.
- Essential oils can also be problematic for chemically sensitive people. They often contain impurities from chemicals used to process them.
- Resist the urge to bring candles, wreathes, potpourri, drawer sachets, or other decorations or “comfort” items into the workplace. Your personal choices are no longer personal when we all work in the same area.
- Fragrances (and therefore chemicals) can get imbedded in our clothing for days. Just a simple hug to a loved one on your way out the door, can bring their fragrances to work. Last Friday evening’s jacket may still have the lingering effects of the products you were wearing that night.

Please do your part to ensure a safe work environment for all your co-workers and customers by being conscientious about the fragrances and chemicals you are bringing into the workplace and minimize the usage of those products. In addition to the obvious colognes and perfumes, the other products for you to limit the use of include: scented soaps, body washes, hair products, and lotions. The best course of action is to check the product labels and choose soaps, body washes, hair products, and lotions that are unscented and/or chemical free.