

SLCC Odd Odors Information

When it comes to air quality issues, odor concerns are one of the most common. There are many potential sources for odors in an indoor environment, fortunately most are not hazardous. We often fall into the trap of equating an odor with a hazard when this is not always the case.

Sources for odor range from cleaning compounds used by facility maintenance staff, burned popcorn, and building construction activities, to last week's lasagna left too long in a garbage can. It is unusual to experience an odor that is a serious hazard. It can be very difficult to locate a source for the odor and very often investigations result in what can be a very frustrating dead end.

Immediately report an odor that is causing severe acute (immediate) symptoms such as watering eyes, coughing, etc. Report these types of odor to EHS, 801-957-4902 - be sure to tell the person who answers that it is an acutely irritating odor.

A few of the more common odor problems experienced on campus are addressed below:

Dry Plumbing Traps

Dry Traps - the most common source of sewer-type odors. A plumbing trap is a section of piping as shown in figure 1:

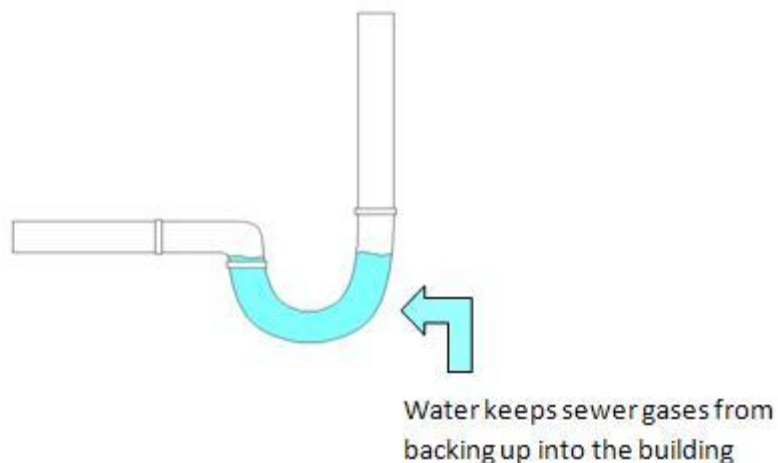


Figure 1 - Plumbing P-trap

The trap is designed to trap sewer gases and odors inside the piping forcing them out through vent pipes which usually extend through the roof of the building. Simply put: when a plumbing trap remains un-used for a long time the water simply evaporates from the trap, permitting sewer gases to back up into the building.

The solution: simply re-fill the trap with water. Drains that remain unused for longer periods of time are often filled with mineral oil, which evaporates at a much slower rate.

Musty or Moldy Odor

Often a musty or moldy smell in an office space can be eliminated or controlled just by ensuring adequate ventilation of the space. It is important to remember that odor does not necessarily equal hazard. Often older buildings on campus carry an odd odor just by virtue of the fact that the building is old and has had generations of odor producing human activity occupying it.

Occasionally the odor can be due to an infiltration of mold.

Believe it or not molds are part of the natural environment, they can, quite literally, be found everywhere - inside or outside - throughout the year. There are around 1,000 species of mold in the United States, with more than 100,000 known species worldwide. For most people molds do not present a problem. But for some groups, such as those with compromised immune systems or severe respiratory problems such as asthma or mold allergies, they can be a hazard.

Outdoors, molds play an important role in nature by breaking down organic matter such as toppled trees, fallen leaves, and dead animals. We would not have food and medicines, like cheese and penicillin, without mold.

Indoors, problems may arise when mold begins to grow on building materials, furniture, or other surfaces.

For molds to grow they need 3 basic items: Water, A nutrient source (which can be virtually anything), and a viable mold spore (think of it as a seed). Eliminate any one of these and mold will not grow.

Since mold is present everywhere and can grow on virtually anything we concentrate on elimination of moisture.

In the event of a large scale event such as a flood, the key is to dry out the impacted materials as quickly as possible. A standard rule of thumb used on campus and based on guidelines for Hospitals is that items should be dried out within 72 hours.

Moisture can also build up on the inside surfaces of exterior walls which can be trapped by furniture pushed too close to the wall - this can provide the moisture sources for mold growth. Keep furniture at least 1" from walls.

If mold growth is found in small patches it can easily be cleaned off using a mild detergent solution and then thoroughly drying the affected area. You should try not to use harsh cleaners such as bleach to clean the growth area - sometimes these solutions introduce a much greater hazard than the mold itself.

Check growth areas for water infiltration and/or leaks to ensure that the growth is not due to an underlying problem. Report leaks immediately to Facilities personnel.

In most office situations, controlling moisture and promptly cleaning small growth areas is sufficient to control mold growth and prevent a hazardous situation from developing.

Chemical type odors

Chemical odors on campus are fairly common and come from a variety of sources. For instance during summer months facilities maintenance may replace a section of broken sidewalk, the new sidewalk is often treated with a sealant material that is quite odiferous but not necessarily hazardous. In laboratory building chemical odors are, as you would expect, very common. Very often an individual will report a chemical odor simply because they haven't smelled it before. Different and/or odiferous do not always equal a hazard. However, if the odor is causing acute symptoms such as tearing eyes and coughing this is a warning to leave the area closing doors behind you, keep others out of the area and contact EHS immediately. If this happens after hours contact Campus Police.

Other sources of chemical type odors are cleaning supplies, perfumes or colognes, construction activities, etc.