



Sick building syndrome

By: World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe

Summary

Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) describes a medical condition where people in a building suffer from symptoms of illness or feel unwell for no apparent reason.

The symptoms tend to increase in severity with the time people spend in the building, and improve over time or even disappear when people are away from the building.

Sick Building Syndrome results in substantial disruption of people's work performance and personal relationships, and considerable loss of productivity.

Sick Building Syndrome is wide spread and may occur in offices, apartment houses, nurseries and schools, resulting in substantial costs to the community. Even though the cause effect relations are unclear it is possible to remedy buildings with SBS problems, and for new buildings the chances of avoiding SBS problems are also good.

Local Government actions can be both for implementing curative measures and for taking preventive actions. These measures and actions range from simple to radical.

In recent years it has become apparent that occupants of buildings suffer a number of relatively minor illnesses where there is no apparent cause, yet it has been established that these are caused in some way by the building. The symptoms are varying degrees of irritation of the eyes, nose, throat or skin plus general symptoms such as lethargy and headaches. Because these illnesses may happen in the building or elsewhere, it was initially difficult to show that they could be caused by the building.

While these symptoms may seem trivial at first sight, together they are a substantial problem.

It was not until the medical condition of "Sick Building Syndrome" was identified that the actual size of the problem could be established and actions taken to improve the incidence of illness. It now appears that Sick Building Syndrome (SBS) is wide-spread, with an estimated proportion as high as 30% of new, remodelled or renovated buildings having occupants with SBS.

SBS may occur in most kinds of building: offices, apartment houses, nurseries and schools. It causes reduced work performance and increased absenteeism, resulting in a total cost which may well be in the range of 0.5-1.0% of GNP.