

Allergic at work?

By [Jen Weigel](#)

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How do you feel when you sit at your desk? Are you sniffing? Do you have trouble breathing? Chances are, you could be allergic to your office.

"One in three people has allergies," says Dr. Lisa Sullivan, an allergy specialist in [Glenview](#). "This means a third of the workforce would benefit from a hypoallergenic workspace."

Hypoallergenic workspace? That sounds complicated.

"Common complaints I hear from my patients are, 'I'm sick at work all the time' or 'my allergies only kick in when I'm at work,'" Sullivan explains. "Some managers don't believe their employees when they complain about having unhealthy workspaces."

Sullivan says that suffering from allergies at work is extremely common, but many are afraid to speak up.

"If you're running a business, you don't want unhealthy workers," says Sullivan. "I had a patient who works for a big corporation. He started having symptoms at work, and his department and section had condensation issues, leak damage, mold in the carpet. Everybody was always sick in the office. He finally asked to be relocated in a noncarpeted space. After he moved, he noticed a difference physically, and I noticed a difference clinically."

But not everyone is lucky enough to get a new workspace. What if you have to live with that shaggy stuff on the floor?

"Be proactive about keeping your carpet clean," says Sullivan. "Fancier vacuums might not have HEPA [High Efficiency Particle Air] filtration, but you need that and not just big suction. Allergen particles are smaller than dirt -- so if you don't have a filter that captures those, then you aren't getting the worst of it. ... Once you go over your carpet with the right vacuum, the difference is really amazing. I can't stress that enough."

Sullivan says some of her patients who work in older buildings have gotten results from their employers by being persistent.

"I have couple of patients who are teachers," she says. "They have old carpeting and no air conditioning. When this happens, the indoor allergen concentration often gets higher inside than outside because everything lives in the carpet. Opening the windows doesn't help because it brings in molds and pollens. One of the teachers asked to be moved to a tiled room with a window air conditioning unit."

Not only did the new workspace help that teacher with her symptoms, but the school put all the asthmatic and allergic kids into her classroom.

"Now everyone is going to be healthier in that room," Sullivan says.

Here are five ways Sullivan says we can be on top of our allergies at the workplace.

Educate yourself. "Once you get informed, be sure to share that information with your employer so you can make concrete suggestions," says Sullivan.

Consider relocating. "If there are areas in your office without carpeting or with fewer fabric dividers, ask to be moved."

Get dust mite covers for your bed and pillows. This will help give you a fresh start every day. "If you wake up every day and have no points against you, by the end of the day you're not as exhausted as you'd be if you breathed in dust mites all night long."

Purchase a small HEPA filter for your workspace. "Avoid ionic filters," says Sullivan. "They let off ozone, which is irritating to the respiratory tract."

Flush your sinuses using a saline spray, or other specific products. "This removes allergens ... that make their way into the nose throughout the day," says Sullivan. "It also clears out mucus and shrinks swelling."

If more people vocalize their needs, Sullivan hopes that more employers will start to make changes. "Often a client will say they don't want to be seen as a complainer because they need their job," she says. "But what employer doesn't want healthy employees?"

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