

# How to Establish a Successful Fragrance-Free Policy in your Health Care Facility

According to the Ontario Environmental Health Clinic at Women's College Hospital in Toronto, it is best to introduce a step-wise process, that is, to first introduce a **fragrance-free encouragement program** which would build awareness and encourage voluntary participation and then advance towards a fragrance-free policy.

In order to introduce an encouragement program, you may visit the website of the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) and follow their "*Scent-Free Policy for the Workplace*", which can be viewed at: [https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent\\_free.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html)

It is preferable to use the term 'fragrance-free' rather than 'scent-free'. 'Unscented' products may contain masking chemicals. Always read labels and avoid products where the terms *parfum*/perfume or fragrance are mentioned.

## The Fragrance-Free Encouragement Program

Create a logo and share it with hospitals across Québec for the sake of uniformity. One example is a logo "*We Share the Air*" which originated with Dalhousie University and was also used by Alberta Health Services and the Peter Lougheed Centre with their names inserted. This logo was also used by the University of Calgary and McMaster University.

Send out an official announcement on your letterhead about your fragrance-free awareness campaign.

Post fragrance-free information on your website, including information on how to be fragrance-free, providing lists of fragrance-free products, tips on how to choose products and a Q&A on the subject. (Please refer to our Q&A section).

Develop a poster that sends out a clear message on the health effects of fragrances. (<https://www.ccohs.ca/products/posters/airaware.html>)

Make presentations to all staff on the subject and establish effective communication for positive outcomes.

Post visible signage in the main areas of your facility informing people why it is important to be fragrance-free especially in a health care setting. Provide an URL of the website and a contact number for help on the signs.

Provide a visible, easily available pamphlet outlining basic information on the health effects of fragrances and strategies for being fragrance-free, especially when in a health care setting.

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## The Fragrance-Free Policy

To view a sample scent-free policy at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety, visit: [https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent\\_free.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html)

In order to create and institute an effective policy, besides consulting with staff, it is a good idea to reach out to hospitals that already have such policies in place. An excellent resource is Women's College Hospital, Environmental Health Clinic (Toronto).

Use your facility's phone message to inform patients and visitors alike of your fragrance-free policy. For example, your voice message could say that your hospital has a fragrance-free policy and ask that people visit your website for details and refrain from using perfumes or other scented products.

New patients and visitors should be informed about the facility's environmental policies, including being fragrance-free during their stay.

There must be education for staff and all new employees in the form of presentations on the 'why and how' of being fragrance-free.

## Maintaining the Policy

As with all rules, regulations and policies, the most important part of the endeavour is the maintenance of the policy so that it does not die out due to a lack of vigilance and effort.

Therefore, it is important that committees are designated to track progress, shortfalls and innovative thinking to resolve issues of non-compliance.

The following is adapted from the Q&A from the Ontario Environmental Health Clinic, Women's College Hospital, Toronto:

### 1. What should I do if a patient is wearing a fragrance that is causing symptoms in another patient or a staff member?

First, remove the person experiencing the symptoms into a "clean" area, i.e. away from the source of the fragrance (See "*How to establish a 'clean room' in your health care facility*" on our webpage). Further steps may be necessary to alleviate the person's symptoms, depending on their type and severity (e.g. oxygen by mask or nasal prongs).

At the discretion of the department manager, the individual wearing the offending fragrance may be asked to wash the fragrance off (i.e. from wrists or neck) in the closest washroom. If the scent is on his or her clothes, a hospital gown may be supplied along with a water-proof bag to store the clothes for the duration of the visit, or a shower cap if the fragrances are in the hair. Alternatively, the patient may decide to re-schedule.

Rarely, if the offending fragrance cannot be washed off, or is permeating underclothes, the manager may have to ask the patient to reschedule. It is important to be polite. You may explain that the hospital has a fragrance-free policy and the fragrance that the offender is wearing has caused symptoms in another patient (or staff person) who has allergies or sensitivities to fragrance.

## 2. What should I do if a co-worker is wearing a fragrance?

If a co-worker, other staff or volunteer is wearing a fragrance, you may politely remind them that your facility has a fragrance-free policy. Some people may become offended, so tactfully explain that personal fragrances can cause symptoms in people with asthma, allergies and environmental sensitivities, can cause headaches and migraines and can persist in any rooms the staff person enters.

Remind the person that “it’s not the smell –it’s the chemicals” that are the cause of the symptoms.

If you are not comfortable speaking directly to other staff members about a fragrance they are wearing, you may approach the department manager. The manager can remind the staff member about the policy, explaining the reasons for the policy and reviewing acceptable products. The manager may also decide to remind all staff about the policy, the reasons for the policy and acceptable fragrance-free products to be worn and used within the hospital.

If you are experiencing symptoms related to fragrance exposure from another staff member, particularly if this is an ongoing issue and/or your symptoms are serious, you should fill in an incident report and speak to your manager. You should also visit the Occupational Health Department and speak to one of the nurses about the exposure and your symptoms.

## 3. What happens if a person and/or family member/friend arrives at the Emergency Department wearing fragrance?

Obviously, in an urgent situation, patients cannot be asked in advance to abstain from wearing fragrances. It would be helpful, if possible, to place that patient and family member/friend as far away from others in the waiting area as soon as possible.

If someone in the Emergency Department is inadvertently exposed to a person’s scent and develops symptoms, the affected person should be moved to a ‘clean room’ (i.e. fragrance/scent-free) as soon as possible.

In addition to the above Q&A, visit the website of the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) to view its webpage “*Scent-Free Policy for the Workplace*” at:

[https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent\\_free.html](https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/hsprograms/scent_free.html)

McMaster University also answers the question “*How can we be efficient in maintaining an optimum fragrance-free program and policy?*” at :

<http://www.workingatmcmaster.ca/med/document/scent-aware-guidelines-1-36.pdf>

Adapted from a document ‘Fragrance Free Implementation Kit for Health Care Facilities’ by greenhealthcare.ca