

Most workplace odors (and complaints resulting from them) are confined to a single room or suite. It is often perceived, however, that the odor stems from the ventilation system. In truth, supply air from the register mixes with room air giving the impression that the mechanical ventilation system is the cause or source of the odor.

The following are common sources of workplace odors and effective ways in which to mitigate or prevent recurrence.

Dry sink and floor drain “P-trap”

The purpose of this device is twofold: Trap debris that has drained from the sink and stop sewer gases from passing into the building space. A dried P-trap is the most common odor source in campus buildings. Odors are often characterized as “rotten eggs” or sewage. Odors are intermittent and may be very strong at times.



The negative air pressure ventilation in a laboratory is more likely to pull up odors from a drain than an office (which has positive pressure ventilation). Dry traps could occur in “cup sinks” (small sinks in the middle of lab benches), floor drains, and sinks covered by equipment or no longer used. Prevent or eliminate dry trap odors by running water in all sinks with a ½-gallon of water once a month.



Office Remodeling

Primer, paint and new furnishings e.g., carpet, laminate flooring, can emanate odors locally and be distributed through the ventilation system. Campus projects use low-odor materials in most cases, but trace odors like a “new car smell” may still be detected by building occupants after the work is completed, and may take some time to dissipate. Maximize air circulation with continuous air circulation until the odors are satisfactory.



Tobacco Smoke

University policy prohibits smoking in enclosed buildings and areas designated as smoke-free. However, renegade smoke from passers-by may filter into first floor areas through open portals (doors, windows).



What I need to do...

- ✓ Fill P-traps or floor drains regularly (Notify FMS Customer Service at (213) 740-6833).
- ✓ Notify my supervisor of any persistent odors.
- ✓ Contact EH&S at (323) 442-2200 to report any indoor air quality (IAQ) issues.

Laboratory Chemicals

In research laboratories, some chemicals emit strong, pungent odors.

Laboratories are designed to maintain a negative pressure between the laboratory and adjacent non-laboratory spaces. This pressure differential prevents uncontrolled chemical odors from leaving the laboratory and migrating to the surrounding areas such as hallways. To minimize bad odors, follow best laboratory work practices and keep the laboratory door closed.



Odors Entering the Building

On occasion, diesel exhaust from stationary generators, delivery trucks, or construction equipment may penetrate buildings. Smoke from on-campus barbeques may also enter buildings. These are normally short-lived events. Close exterior doors and windows. Ask drivers parked near your building’s fresh air intake to turn off their engines. Talk to your building manager if the problem is persistent.



Additional Information

- P-trap and Sewer Gas Smell video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=weI8XMJmnOM>
- USC Indoor Air Quality Program: <http://adminopsnet.usc.edu/node/153>
- USC Smoke-Free Policy: <https://policy.usc.edu/smoke-free/>