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## Ooo that smell

A triple-O threat lurks at work: wafts of offensive office odors

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Something stinks, and it's your office mate's fault.

We're talking that midafternoon burned popcorn or the noontime tuna-and-onion sandwich; the body odor from the man who goes to the gym at lunchtime, or the woman who breathes garlic several mornings a week. And we can't forget the overpowering Drakkar Noir coming from the guy who hasn't fully left college behind. Or, plain and simple, the colleague with a flatulence problem. Many unpleasant smells spread through the office faster than news the boss is sleeping with her secretary.

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These offensive office odors, or triple Os, have become a greater issue as more and more companies have moved to a cubicle-based open work environment, says John Putzier, author of "Weirdos in the Workplace! The New Normal ... Thriving in the Age of the Individual."

"It's like trying to have a smoking section in a restaurant or an airplane and saying the smoking section goes to row 19," says Putzier. "The smoke doesn't know to stop at row 19."

So workers sit and steam as the stench wafts their way. Some people are more sensitive to odors, and others are just more tolerant. But workers take notice.

### Green sandwiches

At Lola Youngblood-Hunter's Albany office, burned popcorn, fish and Chinese leftovers are the foods most often permeating the state worker's space. But the worst odors come from the community fridge.

"People bring their lunch and forget it's in there," says Youngblood-Hunter. "I've found green sandwiches with fur."

And that mold is far from fragrant. Youngblood-Hunter has thrown away entire containers, to keep the odor trapped inside.

Bad smells, like those wafting from the fridge, are hard to avoid. It's easier for the receptors in our nose to detect a stinky smell than a pleasant one, according to Neil Gussman, news editor with Chemical Heritage magazine.

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"Stink is like a schoolyard bully," says Gussman. "It triggers many receptors at once, causing an alarm that warns of danger. Like a bully, it overwhelms all the nice little smells that combine to make a good fragrance."

While the office odors aren't enough to make Youngblood-Hunter retch, it sparks office chatter about who, or what, is causing that smell. The distraction is quick and minimal, and the complaints are all in jest, she says, but impossible to avoid. In an open office, there's no way you wouldn't notice someone eating last night's lobster or General Tso's chicken.

"When you are distracted by offensive odors, you stop working," says Thuy H. Sindell, author of "Sink or Swim: New Job, New Boss, 12 Weeks to Get it Right" and a career and leadership consultant with the San Francisco-based Hit the Ground Running. "(You) think about ways to get relief from the smell, take more breaks and find yourself having to get refocused on what you were in the middle of doing before you were so rudely interrupted."

Communicating discomfort

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