

# Green Your Office

Tips for Making Your Office Design Environmentally Friendly

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**W**e spend about 90 percent of our time indoors. Today's buildings are airtight and seal in harmful toxins, which affects indoor air quality. The tighter your building is, the less the opportunity for gases released from everyday products (such as many cleaning agents, carpet, paint, or formaldehyde used in cabinets and other products) to escape. In a very well-insulated office, these gases will simply recirculate and build in concentration. Your patients and employees will appreciate your ongoing commitment to their well-being while working or visiting your office. Here are some suggestions to detox your office.

## Windows

Open your windows, get some good ventilation, and consider using PVC-free window coverings. Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is a major domestic and global pollutant, since dioxin, one of the most toxic chemicals ever synthesized, is a by-product of both its manufacture and disposal. PVC also needs phthalates to make it functional. They are known to leach out of plastic products into the air and dust. I recommend solar shades, like EcoVeil by Mecho, which can be reclaimed and recycled. This product reduces heat gain (which saves on utility bills) and has different options of visibility. Another choice would be Conrad window shades, which use beautiful natural fibers for a softer look.

## Walls

Use only natural or no-VOC paint inside the office. Paints and finishes can release VOC emissions for years after application. AFM's SafeCoat paint (exterior and interior) has been recommended by doctors for people with chemical sensitivi-

ties and allergies. I like Green Planet Paints, which have no toxic petrochemicals and are a clay paint. Plaster walls have a beautiful texture and improve air quality, since they absorb CO<sub>2</sub> while curing. Two brands I like are Tobias limestone plaster and American Clay plaster. My favorite decorative wall covering is by Jacobsen & Balla and is 100 percent postconsumer-waste recycled paper, is handpainted and manufactured in the San Francisco Bay Area, and has a class A fire rating. It is also moisture resistant and washable.

## Flooring

Consider using natural products that come from sustainable sources such as wood, bamboo, cork, and linoleum, which are preferable to man-made products that are generally derived from oil. When the products are natural, they are usually biodegradable. Carpet is one of the worse offenders in a landfill. Today there are many locations to drop off old carpet to be recycled. Carpet is horrible for allergies and other respiratory problems because it contributes to both particulate allergens and it off-gases VOCs. If you must have carpet, look for low-VOC types that have the Green Label Plus certification, and carpet that may have recycled content and is recyclable. Consider doormats for your entry to catch allergens and dirt before they are tracked inside.

## Cabinets and Furniture


Particleboard, often used in cabinets, has urea-formaldehyde resins that release formaldehyde, a known carcinogen with no recognized safe level of exposure. Choose composites and plywoods that do not have added urea formaldehyde. You can get exotic FSC (Forest Stewardship Council)-

certified or salvaged veneers that achieve a high-end look. Today, there are many options for furniture and natural fiber fabrics with natural dyes and finishes. Your choices are not limited.

## Office Equipment

Most offices have plenty of computers, copiers, printers, and medical equipment that are packed with toxic synthetic chemicals. These release more gaseous pollutants into the air, and the longer the appliances are on, the hotter they get. Turn off when not in use, and buy from manufacturers committed to reducing toxic chemical content. For example, Dell is phasing out brominated flame retardants and PVC by 2009; and Nokia, Samsung, and Sony are following suit.

## Cleaning Products

After installing beautiful, safe, and healthy interior finishes, the last thing you want to have happen is to spoil things with toxic cleaning solutions, used by an unaware cleaning crew. There are safe and effective cleaning agents available, and it is important to have them handy and to instruct the cleaning crew on how to safely clean your newly "greened-up" office. 

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