Suggestions: office kitchen odor elimination

**Question:** I work in a small office with about 17 people. We have a kitchen in our office with a microwave, refrigerator and toaster oven. It has come to our attention that some of the kitchen odors are offensive to other co-workers and clients who may be in the office for a meeting. Even with the kitchen door closed, the odor permeates the office. In particular, onions and garlic were mentioned, but really, any strong odors would fall into this category.

It has been requested that a memo go out to everyone asking them not to eat things that have onions or garlic. My question is : How do you limit what employees can eat and how do you determine what odor is permitted and what is not? A lot of people bring leftover meals rather than going out to lunch for the sake of saving time and money, so this may create a problem for some.

I'd love to hear suggestions or if anyone has gone through a similar situation and how you handled it.

Thank you, -- Anonymous

**Comments**

I don't think there is any way to tell employees they can't heat up food with onions and garlic in it. A memo stating restrictions on what can be heated up will only upset people. The only offensive odor from a kitchen would be garbage that needs to be emptied. Sure, sometimes strong smelling foods get heated up at my office and people comment but no one would go so far as to tell someone they can't heat up their lunch. That's just rude. Try placing a fan to vent the food smell or use a plug in air freshener. Really, no one should be "offended" by the smell of spicy food. Essentially, this should not be an issue. Good luck.

**Posted by: Tracy | November 04, 2005 at 05:20 PM**

Try using Febreze room spray . It really removes odors quickly. SO after someone finishes their meal, spray the room. It MAY help.

**Posted by: Sue | November 04, 2005 at 05:23 PM**

Sending a memo restricting food that can be heated in your kitchen is a delicate situation. You may offend someone who's culture uses large amounts of garlic and onions in their food preparation. It would be better for the company to invest in a small air purifier.

**Posted by: Michelle | November 04, 2005 at 05:27 PM**
I can't think of how to handle it, but I can tell you that at a company I once worked at the Health and Safety Officer evacuated the building because of a strong noxious odor. He was running around in a panic with his gas chromatograph and couldn't identify the source. Turned out it was someone's lunch! Really!

Afterwards, we could only laugh at folks who dared bring in odorous items.

**Posted by: Bernie | November 04, 2005 at 05:51 PM**

This is the most absurd thing I've ever heard. Why don't your company just remove the microwave entirely? Especially, if odors are a problem. Will your company pay for the meals of the persons who have the odoriferous lunches?

Please forgive me if I come across as shrewd, but I can not help but feel offensive - even though I don't belong to this group of people.

To appear sensitive to employees' needs, at least offer to move the microwave to a different part of the office. Is that an option?

Anonymous? If you see this message, please don't take this the wrong way. However, please acknowledge that this may be a tough subject for people.

Thank you,

Steph

**Posted by: Steph | November 04, 2005 at 08:12 PM**

I see a lot of sensitivity - or should I call it over-sensitivity to such issues these days. Seems like we are getting so caught up with looking professional and perfect all the time that we are forgetting that we are humans here with different preferences, tastes and issues. As long as things don't pose a direct threat or inconvenience to anyone, we need to get more tolerant. Of course I don't mean people should be obscene and we smile and put up with it, but it just helps to remember that the people we best remember working with are those that got along with others just as they were without criticism or discrimination, I think now and then we need to come back to this. Its not necessarily easier to work around things like this, but it sure helps everyone concerned and makes for a more people-friendly work space. Being from a country that prides itself on "Unity in diversity", I can only advocate that!

**Posted by: | November 05, 2005 at 12:31 AM**

From the answers to your kitchen odor problem it clearly appears to be a sensitive issue - both nose and feelings. Whatever happened to common courtesy. Being from an Italian family, we certainly love our garlic, but also understand that not everyone does. Garlic is a pretty strong odor, not only in the kitchen, but on your breath as well. I limit my garlic intake to either home or an Italian-style restaurant (at least we all smell alike).

All kidding aside, there are a lot of other lunch choices to bring from home. I wouldn't be offended if I saw a memo asking to be considerate of others in the office as others may find the garlic and onion lunches offensive. But then I try to be considerate of others without having it pointed out to me.
I agree with the other responses. It is a little overbearing and controlling to send a memo about what staff is allowed to eat for lunch. It sounds like the staff that are complaining are the problem and to send this memo would add trouble. You don't want to provoke more negativity in the office. It is a small office and people will talk. I would sit with the "complainer" and explain to them that they shouldn't worry about a small thing such as lunch and that you are not going to confront the garlic eaters because honestly their complaint is trivial.

Posted by: Jocelyn | November 07, 2005 at 08:50 AM

I work for a medium size 24 hour a day agency. I agree some smells can be offensive when someone is cooking. However, I feel a problem is being created when there should not be one. What is an offensive smell to one person may not be to someone else. I would keep a bottle of Odor-Ban, Oust or Febreze around and not sweat it too much.

Posted by: Jo | November 07, 2005 at 09:29 AM

I think this is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard of!

Did someone with authority suggest the "you" send out a memo? First of all it's ridiculous, but if management is really that insensitive, let them send the memo out.

Tell them to get a clue and by an air purifier OR pay to get the place vented (which is probably a building requirement to begin with).

I agree with the person that said "The only offensive odor from a kitchen would be garbage that needs to be emptied".

We've had food go bad in our refrigerator which created terrible odors, so we sent an email requesting everyone to check the refrigerator to see if they left something that went bad, but that's an entirely different type of odor problem.

I feel bad that you even have to work for people that insensitive.

Annie M.

Posted by: Annie M. | November 07, 2005 at 09:37 AM

Hello,

Please see below my suggestion to Problem #2.

This Week’s Problem 2:

I work in a small office with about 17 people. We have a kitchen in our office with a microwave, refrigerator and toaster oven. It has come to our attention that some of the kitchen odors are offensive to other co-workers and clients who may be in the office for a meeting. Even with the kitchen door closed, the odor permeates the office.
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I'd love to hear suggestions or if anyone has gone through a similar situation and how you handled it.

Suggestion:

I have consulted with our Maintenance Manager of our company and he suggested that you:

1. Window type A/C unit just for the cafeteria or split unit if cafeteria is too big.

2. Eliminate A/C ducts from the cafeteria. Actually odors comes from the A/C units, not the doors. Odors penetrates A/C ducts spreading to other offices.

Once you have A/C unit only for the cafeteria the odors will not spread to other offices. If you prefer you may include an extractor.

Patricia

Posted by: Patricia García | November 07, 2005 at 10:27 AM

While it is unreasonable expect any place where people eat lunch not to smell like food at times, I think that measures should be taken to keep the smells in the lunchroom. If this means having the building maintenance reroute some ducts, moving the microwave, or adding fans or pitching in to buy an air purifier, so be it.

People are sensitive about their food, so I think steps should be taken to deal with this issue without making any additional rules. There is too much potential for causing offense. At the same time, some people are very sensitive to scents due to illness, pregnancy, or some other factor beyond their control. It's a sensitive balance, but you don't want to go too far in either direction.

Posted by: Anne S. | November 07, 2005 at 11:27 AM

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Posted by: Anne S. | November 07, 2005 at 11:29 AM

I don't think you can keep people from bringing in food that has an odor. That's how food it! Personally I don't
like the smell of popcorn in the morning, but we have a popcorn machine and sometimes I have to put up with it. I also detest the smell of tea, but I have to put up with that too. On the other hand, I like salmon, and some people can't stand the smell of it, but they too must tolerate it. Do what you can to lessen or eliminate the odors, but please don't tell people they can't bring their food. That's only asking for trouble.

Posted by: Diana | November 07, 2005 at 11:49 AM

My feeling is with the majority of writers, I feel it would be offensive to ask someone not bring certain foods for lunch unless YOUR COMPANY IS GOING TO BUY LUNCH EVERYDAY!!! The next thing they will request is "how you should dress, eat, stand, sit, roll over"!!! Get the picture!

Posted by: Raleigh, NC | November 07, 2005 at 01:36 PM

I worked in an office that was an open room with cubicles. The 'kitchen area' was one of them. Our manager decided to make a rule that food was only to be cooked from noon to 1p to help avoid odors at other times of the day. This worked out pretty good.

Posted by: Susan | November 08, 2005 at 03:54 PM