Chemical & fragrance sensitivity

A reference for families, educators, and school health staff

Record the child's experience, staff observations, and effect on participation. Symptoms deserve attention, but an odor or timing pattern alone does not identify a chemical, exposure level, or cause. Medical assessment and a school indoor-air review answer different questions. [1,2]

PLACE / ACTIVITY → WHAT WAS NOTICED → SUPPORT GIVEN → AFTERWARD

What a child may feel or staff may notice [1,2]



Headache / dizziness: head hurts or feels dizzy.



Eyes / nose / throat: stinging, soreness, or irritation.



Breathing: cough, wheeze, chest tightness, or difficulty breathing.



Stomach: nausea or feeling sick.



Energy / attention: unusual tiredness or trouble participating.

Invite the student to point to an icon or use their own words, such as 'head hurts,' 'eyes sting,' 'tummy feels unwell,' or 'need help.' Record their exact words; do not coach an explanation.

School support checklist

Discuss with the family, nurse, and school team. Individualize supports.

- ☐ Name a staff contact and family update method; review existing health plans with the nurse.
- ☐ Agree on a simple help signal and a supervised alternative space when needed.
- ☐ Review sprays, plug-ins, and diffusers; discuss fragrance-free options. 'Unscented' can include masking fragrance. [1,3]
- ☐ Ask facilities staff to review cleaning products / timing, recent work, and ventilation; discuss advance notice of changes. [1,2]
- ☐ Set a review date. Note whether agreed changes helped participation.

For symptoms, contact the nurse or designated adult and follow existing plans. Do not ask a child to smell or revisit a suspected product to prove a reaction. Breathing difficulty or immediate safety concern: follow school emergency procedures; do not wait to log. [4]

This tool is for personal observation and documentation only. It is not a medical record or diagnostic tool.

What to notice and track

A reference for noticing patterns and discussing support. No personal information is required.

LOOK ACROSS THE DAY

Arrival · Activities · Meals · Later in the day · Away from school

Consider timing and setting alongside usual functioning. Similar observations across days can inform a discussion; they do not establish a diagnosis or cause.

Observation area	Useful details to consider
Time, setting, and activity	Notice whether symptoms are reported during particular rooms, activities, or parts of the day. Include occasions when symptoms are not noticed.
Reported and observed	Keep the student's description separate from visible signs or changes in participation.
Nearby changes	Consider products, cleaning, repairs, painting, or ventilation changes. Distinguish confirmed information from a suspicion or unknown detail.
Duration and participation	Describe how long the difficulty lasted and whether learning, play, eating, or usual activities were affected.
Support and afterward	Notice what happened after an agreed break or change of location. A timing pattern is a clue to review, not proof of a cause.

Questions to discuss

- What does the existing health plan say, and how can the student request help?
- Which classroom or facilities changes need review, and who can confirm product or maintenance information?
- How will the family, school nurse, and relevant staff review whether agreed supports helped?

Record duration, support, and what happened after a break or location change. A pattern is a clue to review, not proof of a cause. Never arrange re-exposure to test it.

Sources & further reading

[1] American Lung Association - Fragrances (lung.org)
[2] US EPA - Reference Guide for Indoor Air Quality in Schools (epa.gov)
[3] US EPA - Safer Choice: Fragrance-Free (epa.gov)
[4] NHLBI - Managing Asthma: A Guide for Schools (nhlbi.nih.gov)

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