

Safer lodging for the environmentally sensitive traveler



It can be hard to find a safe place to sleep when you travel. We provide some tips on how to find one, and how to make it work.

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Travelers with chemical or electrical sensitivities often resort to sleeping in their car or tent, but sometimes that is not realistic. Some sort of lodging may be needed. People have used hotels, motels, bed-and-breakfasts (B & Bs), and rustic cabins.

B & Bs can work well. They tend to show pictures on their website so you can see if their floors are carpeted, etc. Just be cautious about older buildings, which may be moldy, with fragrances used to cover up the smell.

Cabins can also work, if they are not newly renovated or moldy. They are found in some state parks, but the commute may be too far, especially if you are visiting a big city.

No fresh air

Most hotel rooms do not really have a way to provide fresh air. The heating and cooling is done right in the room, not through air ducts that *might* add fresh air. In some hotels warm or cool air does come from a register in the wall, but that may be from a unit built into the wall that just re-uses the room air taken from another register close by (look for two registers on the same wall).

The only exhaust may be in the bathroom, which then pulls in a little air under the door from the hallway. That's the only "fresh" air coming in, if the window isn't open.

The window may not be possible to open, especially in tall buildings.

Most hotels renovate their rooms every so many years, with new carpeting, so the rooms look in perfect condition. Carpets are toxic for years.

The motel advantage

Motels are usually better than hotels. Each room opens directly to the outdoors and the windows can usually be opened. Many of them are on the outskirts of cities, so the outside air pollution may be less (though they are often next to a freeway).

Some hotel chains are better

The Scandic hotel chain covers much of northern Europe and provides exceptionally environmentally friendly rooms with hardwood floors and non-toxic cleaning products. Using as few toxic chemicals as possible is part of their mission, and EI travelers report it is better than the rest.

In the United States, MCS travelers have had good luck with Motel 6, where many of their motels have bamboo flooring (which lasts much longer than carpeting).



Bamboo floor in a Motel 6 room.

Pricier chains, such as Hilton, Marriott, and Hyatt are more willing to accommodate “special” requests, and have worked for some people.

Branded rooms overrated

Some hotel chains offer branded rooms, such as Stay Well or Pure Rooms. There also used to be a Green Room system.

The focus is that the rooms have an air purifier, but rarely one that removes chemical fumes. The concern is more pollen, germs, and smoke particles.

Extra cost

Lodging that offer rooms with air purifiers or are cleaned with non-toxic products often charge extra for what they consider special services.

If the staff has done extra to help you out, a good tip should be in order.

Questions to ask

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When you call a hotel, these are questions that can help you evaluate the place beforehand:

- Do you have rooms for people with allergies?
- Do you have non-smoking rooms?
- Do you fragrance your rooms?
- Do you have rooms without carpeting?
- Do you have rooms with windows that open, or a door to a balcony?
- Can you ask housekeeping to remove all fragranced products from the room and bathroom?
- Will you not rent out the room the night before, giving more time to outgas cleaning products?
- Have you renovated the rooms within the past two years?

You can also ask if they are willing to clean the room with non-toxic products, such as vinegar. This may work best for B & Bs and small hotels.

Reserving a room

When you reserve a room, consider asking for:

- A room well above street level for better outside air
- A room with a balcony (if windows cannot be opened)
- A room away from the road
- A room not renovated in past two years
- Block the room so it is not rented out the night before
- Housekeeping to remove all toiletries and fragrances from the room

Lower EMF

To get somewhat lower radio-frequency radiation, you can try asking for a room that is

- Away from the reception area
- At the very end of the building
- In a less-busy part
- Not next to any utility room or elevator

Asking for more specific information, such as how close they are to a power line or a cell tower will probably not give you accurate information. Those things are not on most people's mind.

The reason you want to be away from the reception area is that it usually houses the Wi-Fi router that serves the building. (A large hotel may have one on each floor.) There will also be more people, who may use their phones.

Asking them to turn off their Wi-Fi is very unlikely to be honored. Their other guests expect that to be available.

If you can get an end unit, there will be fewer neighbors.

You may reduce the radiation if you move the bed up against an outside wall, or to the middle of the room.

When you arrive

Try to arrive mid-afternoon so you have daylight to look for another hotel if you have to go elsewhere.

Check in as normal, though make sure to remind the receptionist if they are holding a specific room for you (such as one blocked the day before so it wasn't cleaned this morning).

Then immediately go check out the room. Go through the bathroom and remove all toiletries placed there. They can be put into the trash can. Then place the trash can outside the door.

Air out the room if needed.

Keeping the bathroom exhaust fan on may help a little. In some places it runs on a timer each morning, and cannot be controlled by you.

Keeping the room very cold can lessen the outgassing of chemicals. You may need to bring a sweater.

Some hotels have powerful fragrances in the hallway. In that case try placing a rolled-up towel to cover the gap under the door.

If the room doesn't work

If this is not a room you can spend the night in, go back to the reception and complain. The receptionist will want to keep your business and has a lot of leeway to make the customer stay when there is a problem.

They will typically offer you another room, such as one not renovated for a long time. They may offer you a room with a balcony, which has a door you can keep open (they ought not to charge you extra).

If the windows can't open, and they have no room with a balcony, they could send a maintenance person to unlock the window. Most windows can be unlocked for when they are washed.

Things to bring

You should bring your own towel and toiletries, so you don't have to use theirs.

You can also bring your own bedding. A light-weight option is to bring 3 flat sheets and one towel. The towel is used as a pillow. The three sheets are placed on the bed so they enclose the regular bedding:

- one sheet covers the regular bedsheet (or replaces it)
- one sheet is under the blanket
- one sheet is on top of the blanket

Some brought a sleeping bag and a large sheet of some tolerable material (painter's drop cloth, Tu-Tuff, etc). The sheet covers the entire bed, and the sleeping bag is put on top. Consider bringing a fan to place in the open window. They are most effective when blowing air out, rather than pulling air in.

Towels

The hotel's towels may be washed with fabric softener. Don't use them, bring your own.

One person took a shower and dried herself with the hotel towel. That resulted in her entire body becoming covered with fabric softener, which was really hard to scrub off again.

Air purifier

It is probably not worth it to bring an air purifier. The small portable models are worthless and even a larger one won't be able to do much in a toxic room. They just dilute the fumes a bit and are no replacement for an open window.

Most air purifiers only filter out dust and particles, they do not remove fumes, which require hefty filter materials.

If staying more nights

If you stay more than one night, hang the “Do not disturb” sign on the door handle. Then housekeeping won’t enter your room.

Even if they agreed to not do anything toxic in your room, mistakes happen. It is not a problem to keep the sign in place for a week, they may just ask if you really don’t want housekeeping.

Radical methods

People have been very inventive making a stinky hotel room work for them.

One person pulled the desk up against the open window and slept with the head right next to the window. The desk is easier to move than the bed and it is also higher and thus closer to the window.

People have had to camp on the balcony. Move what you need out there and hope it won’t rain much. It can work quite well.

Some spent the night in their cars and only used the shower and toilet in their motel room.

It is possible to take a shower while wearing a respirator. You just hold your breath while quickly taking it off and washing your face.

One person actually brought a tent, an aluminum dryer hose and a small Austin air purifier to a toxic motel room. The tent was placed on top of the bed, with the air purifier delivering air through the hose into the tent.

More information

Other articles about how to cope with chemical and electrical sensitivities at www.eiwellspring.org.

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