

Bad Smells, Lost Sales: 41% Say Odor Is a Bigger Air Quality Red Flag Than a Virus Outbreak

In the absence of visible air data, Americans are relying on their senses to judge indoor air quality, and foul odors are pushing them out of public spaces fast.

A strange odor. A stuffy room. A lingering cough. These subtle signals have become powerful influencers in the post-COVID world, and they're quietly reshaping how people move through public life. Whether they're choosing where to shop, work out, or send their kids to school, people are relying on what they can sense to judge what they can't see.

That reliance on gut checks over scientific data is creating a new challenge for businesses, schools, and other shared spaces. According to the 2025 GPS Air Indoor Air Perception Report, 41% of Americans say unpleasant odors would keep them from returning to a gym, store, or office, more than the 34% who say the same about a known virus outbreak. And just 9% believe public spaces have better air systems than their own homes.

This growing "air distrust" signals more than a temporary concern. It's a shift in expectations that could shape behavior, brand loyalty, and even public health for years to come.

So what are people noticing? What makes them suspicious, reassured, or ready to walk out? And how are these perceptions shaping expectations across industries?

To better understand how Americans assess indoor air safety and what influences their trust in shared environments, GPS Air partnered with the third-party survey platform Pollfish.

The **2025 GPS Air Indoor Air Quality Perception Report** survey was conducted in May 2025, surveying 1,000 U.S. adults across a diverse range of demographics. Participants shared how they perceive indoor air quality, what red flags shape their decisions, and which environmental cues impact their comfort, trust, and behavior in public spaces.

Key Findings

- Awareness is up: 66% of Americans say they're more cautious about indoor air since the pandemic, and 70% say wildfires, pollution, and other recent events have made them more mindful of what they're breathing.
- Trust breaks down in public: Over half (56%) trust the air in their homes more than in shared spaces like gyms or stores, and only 9% think public spaces have better systems.

- Smell is a dealbreaker: 41% say unpleasant odors would keep them from returning to a gym, store, or office. That's more than the 34% who say the same about a known virus outbreak.
- People want proof: 61% say they'd trust a space more if they knew it monitored indoor air quality. Nearly two-thirds (65%) believe businesses should publicly display air scores, like health ratings.
- Schools and airports are under pressure: 77% want mandatory air quality testing and reporting in schools, and 78% say visible clean-air efforts would make them more comfortable in airports.
- Ratings carry weight: 80% say they'd consider air quality ratings when making travel or event decisions, and 21% say those scores would be a major factor.
- Clean air earns business: 66% would switch gyms for better air filtration, even if it costs more. More than half (52%) would pick a hotel with cleaner air over one at the same price.

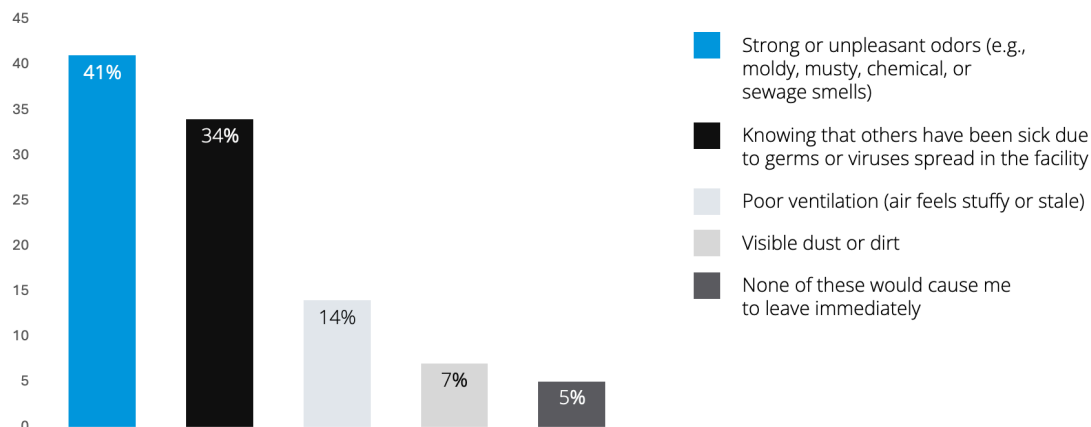
"Today's consumers are making real-time decisions about indoor spaces based on what they can immediately sense," said Audwin Cash, CEO of GPS Air. "Indoor air quality has shifted from a maintenance issue to a frontline experience factor. For businesses, this isn't just about comfort; it's about reputation, loyalty, and trust. If you're not visibly managing your indoor air quality, you're already falling behind. The companies that take it seriously will be the ones that earn lasting confidence"

Bad Smells Kill Trust with Customers

When it comes to judging the quality of indoor air, Americans are far more likely to rely on their senses than on data or documentation. In fact, 41% said unpleasant odors—like moldy, musty, or chemical smells—would make them avoid returning to a gym, store, or office. That's more than the 34% who cited a known virus outbreak, and far above those concerned about ventilation or visible dust.



What air quality issues would most likely cause you to avoid returning to a gym, store, or office?



Graphic: <https://ideagrove.egnyte.com/dl/QHp8qJQtPBdP>

Scent and staleness were also the most common triggers for noticing indoor air issues. Nearly half (45%) of respondents said they were most likely to think about indoor air quality when the air smelled strange or stale. That response outweighed more obvious cues like someone nearby coughing or sneezing (28%) or personal allergic reactions (13%). Similarly, when asked what would make them most suspicious that something was wrong with a building's air, 48% pointed to strange odors or stuffiness, double the share who cited sneezing or allergy symptoms.

The emphasis on sensory perception also reveals lingering misconceptions about what actually improves air quality. When asked about indoor plants, 56% of respondents said they believe plants significantly improve indoor air quality, even though scientific studies show the effect is minimal in most real-world settings. These findings illustrate how perception, particularly driven by smell and visible cues, continues to shape public understanding and expectations around indoor air quality.

From Hospitals to Airports, Americans Don't Trust the Air in Most Public Places

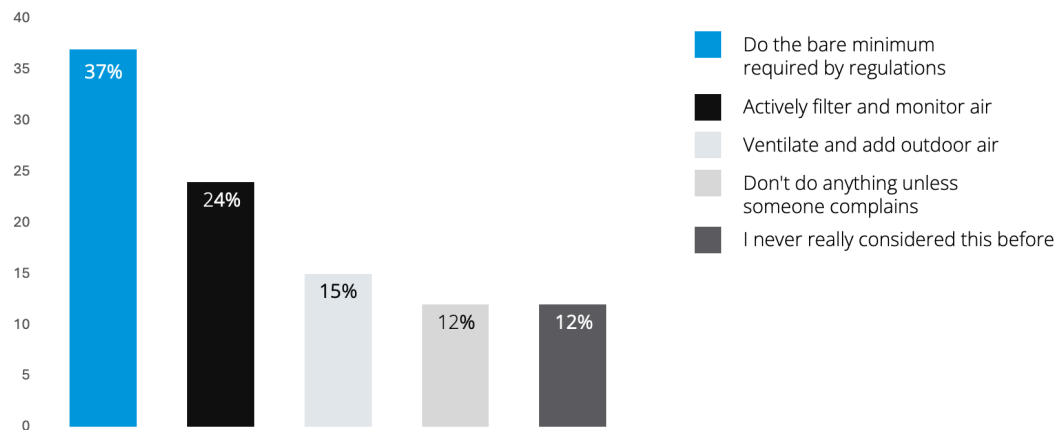
While many Americans may not understand precisely how indoor air quality is managed, they've already formed opinions about where they do, and don't, feel safe. The majority (56%) say they trust the air in their own homes more than in shared spaces like offices, gyms, or stores, while only 9% believe public spaces have better systems.

Concerns are especially high in certain types of environments. When asked where they're most worried about germ exposure, 39% named hospitals, making them the most cited location for

this concern. Meanwhile, 33% selected airports as their top concern for indoor air pollution, highlighting how location type shapes different air-related anxieties.

This underlying skepticism extends to how businesses are perceived. Nearly 40% believe most businesses are doing only the bare minimum required by law to maintain indoor air quality. Just 24% think businesses are actively filtering and monitoring the air, and 12% suspect companies take no action at all unless someone complains.

What do you suspect most businesses do to maintain indoor air quality?



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Retailers may be especially vulnerable to these assumptions. Respondents were asked which type of facility they believe pays the least attention to air quality. Smaller boutique shops (22%) and big-box stores (21%) topped the list, far ahead of traditionally scrutinized environments like schools, gyms, and restaurants.

Together, these findings reveal a troubling perception gap. Consumers aren't walking into most businesses with trust, but with doubt. For companies that fail to address air quality visibly and proactively, this default skepticism may be costing them more than they realize.

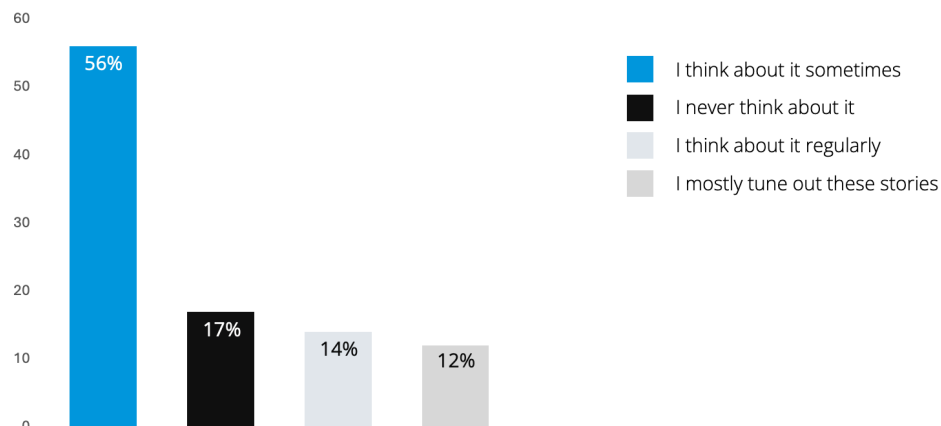
Health and Climate Crises Have Brought Indoor Air Quality Front and Center

The COVID-19 pandemic has left a lasting impression on Americans' perceptions of indoor air. Two-thirds of respondents say they are now more cautious in shared spaces like airports, schools, and malls. Only a small minority (just 4%) say they've become less cautious since the pandemic.

This heightened awareness isn't limited to COVID-19. Nearly 70% of respondents say events such as wildfires, pollution, and disease outbreaks have made them more mindful of the air they breathe indoors. Most say they think about it at least occasionally, with 56% thinking about it "sometimes" and 14% thinking about it "regularly."



How has news about wildfire smoke, disease outbreaks, or rise in pollution levels made you more conscious of the air you breathe indoors?



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The data points to a lasting shift in mindset. COVID-19 may have triggered new concerns, but ongoing environmental threats continue to shape how people assess the safety of indoor spaces. Air quality has become part of the everyday risk calculation.

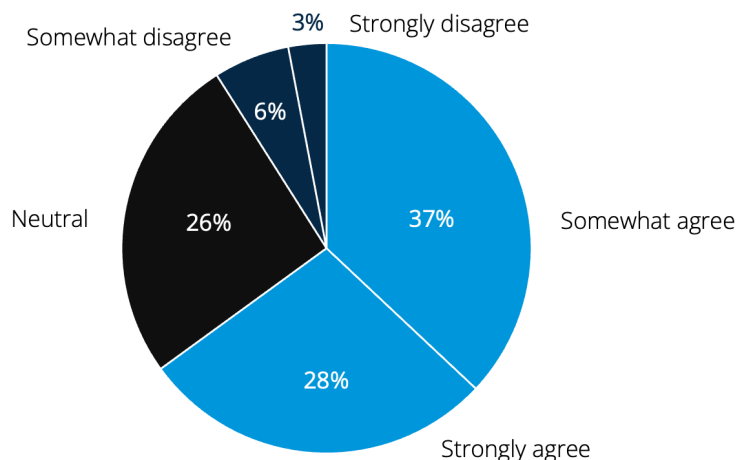
Americans Want Visible Proof of Indoor Air Quality in Schools, Restaurants, Airports and Businesses

Americans are looking for visible proof that clean air is being taken seriously. 61% say they would trust a gym, school, or workplace more if they knew it was actively monitoring indoor air quality. Only 9% say they wouldn't care at all.

That trust increases when transparency becomes public. 65% of respondents believe businesses should be required to display how well they maintain indoor air quality, similar to restaurant health ratings. And when it comes to schools, the demand for accountability is even higher: 77% support policies that would require schools to regularly test and report on their indoor air.



Should businesses be required to publicly display how well they maintain air quality (similar to restaurant health ratings)?



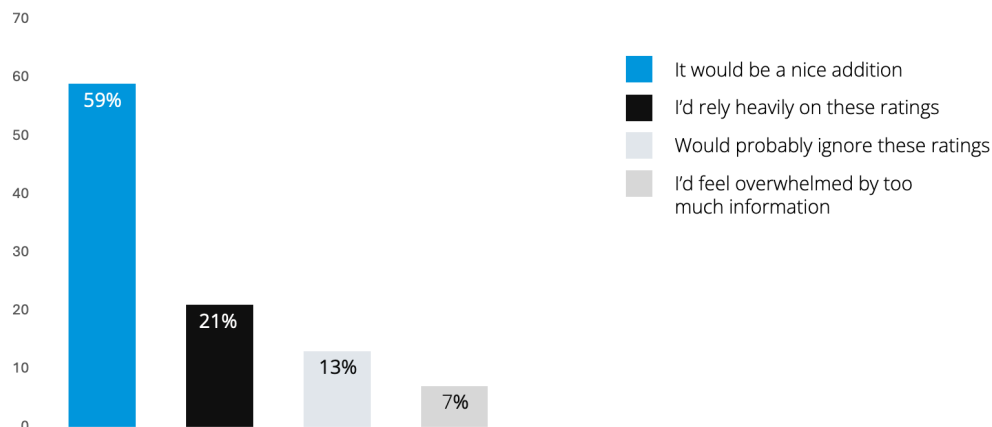
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Nearly half of parents say they would feel relieved if their child's school started sharing air quality scores, while only 16% would be indifferent. In airports, the presence of visible clean-air efforts would improve comfort for 78% of travelers.

Ratings matter too. Eight in ten say they would use indoor air-quality ratings when making travel or venue choices, with 21% saying they'd rely heavily on them. Two-thirds believe mandatory disclosures would lead to better air management in businesses and schools. And for workplaces and schools alike, the benefits go beyond perception—53% of Americans say cleaner, fresher-smelling air directly improves their productivity and focus.



If websites like Yelp or TripAdvisor started clearly rating hotels or venues based on indoor air quality, how would it affect your booking choices?



Graphic: <https://ideagrove.egnyte.com/dl/PRFjc97mppxd>

Even in casual settings like restaurants or cafes, air awareness matters. 65% say they would prefer dining in places that advertise their air-quality efforts, with nearly a third expressing a strong preference.

The message is clear: visibility drives trust. When businesses make clean air part of the customer experience, it becomes a differentiator, not just a background benefit.

Air Quality Sways Where Americans Work Out and Travel

Clean air isn't just a preference, but a deciding factor. Two-thirds of Americans (66%) say they would consider switching gyms if another nearby gym advertised better air filtration, even if it came with a slightly higher price. Only 7% say they wouldn't consider it at all.

Preferences around air quality extend to travel as well. Over half of respondents (52%) say they would choose a hotel that advertised better indoor air quality over one with equal pricing. While only 28% say they would pay more for that improvement, the data still shows that air quality influences decisions, even when price is a factor.

While consumers may not be willing to pay significantly more, they are ready to walk away from options that feel unsafe or neglected. Businesses that visibly prioritize indoor air quality may gain a competitive edge, especially in industries where customers have choices.

Conclusion

The findings in this report reveal a growing divide between how indoor air is managed and how it's perceived. As people become more attuned to their environments, sensory cues are influencing decisions in ways that traditional behind-the-scenes efforts can't fully address. This shift is shaping where people go, how long they stay, and which brands or institutions they trust.

To close this perception gap, the next frontier isn't just cleaner air, but confidence in it. That means making air quality something people can see, not just assume. Tools that monitor, validate, and clearly communicate indoor air quality in real time have the potential to restore trust, support public health, and set a new standard for accountability in shared spaces.

"Indoor air quality can't be treated as an afterthought. It has to be a strategic priority," said Cash. "From retail to education to hospitality, the spaces people spend time in are under more scrutiny than ever. If businesses want to retain trust, they need to invest in the health and safety of their environments. That starts with putting air quality at the center of their operational standards."