

Plenum Space vs. Air Handling Space

The industry wide confusion regarding the definition of a *plenum space* verses an *air handling space* is very common as the area above a drop ceiling is mistakenly referred to as a plenum. Simply stated, the NEC defines a *plenum area* as, “a compartment or chamber to which one or more air ducts are connected and that forms part of the air distribution system.” It also references, “the space over a hung ceiling used for environmental air-handling purposes,” and, “areas beneath raised floors for information technology equipment,” as *air handling space*. Often, the NEC definition of these terms differs from their common use in the industry – however, UL is compatible with the NEC terms and definitions. Therefore, the space above a hung (or drop/suspended) ceiling utilized as an air return to the HVAC unit is considered an air handling space. Additionally, the area below a raised floor used to supply conditioned air is also considered an air handling space.

National Electrical Code® 2017 Edition Article 300.22 (C) and (D)

(C) Other Spaces Used for Environmental Air (Plenums). This section shall apply to spaces not specifically fabricated for environmental air-handling purposes but used for air-handling purposes as a plenum. This section shall not apply to habitable rooms or areas of buildings, the prime purpose of which is not air handling.

Informational Note No. 1: The space over a hung ceiling used for environmental air-handling purposes is an example of the type of other space to which this section applies.

Informational Note No. 2: The phrase “Other Spaces Used for Environmental Air (Plenum)” as used in this section correlates with the use of the term “plenum” in NFPA 90A-2015, *Standard for the Installation of Air-Conditioning and Ventilating Systems*, and other mechanical codes where the plenum is used for return air purposes, as well as some other air-handling spaces.

Exception: This section shall not apply to the joist or stud spaces of dwelling units where the wiring passes through such spaces perpendicular to the long dimension of such spaces.

(1) Wiring Methods. The wiring methods for such other space shall be limited to totally enclosed, nonventilated, insulated busway having no provisions for plug-in connections, Type MI cable without an overall nonmetallic covering, Type MC cable without an overall nonmetallic covering, Type AC cable, or other factory-assembled multiconductor control or power cable that is specifically listed for use within an air-handling space, or listed prefabricated cable assemblies of metallic manufactured wiring systems without nonmetallic sheath. Other types of cables, conductors, and raceways shall be permitted to be installed in electrical metallic tubing, flexible metallic tubing, intermediate metal conduit, rigid metal conduit without an overall nonmetallic covering, flexible metal conduit, or, where accessible, surface metal raceway or metal wireway with metal covers. Nonmetallic cable ties and other nonmetallic cable accessories used to secure and support cables shall be listed as having low smoke and heat release properties.

Informational Note: One method to determine low smoke and heat release properties is that the nonmetallic cable ties and other nonmetallic cable accessories exhibit a maximum peak optical density of 0.50 or less, an average optical density of 0.15 or less, and a peak heat release rate of 100 kW or less when tested in accordance with ANSI/UL 2043-2008, *Fire Test for Heat and Visible Smoke Release for Discrete Products and Their Accessories Installed in Air-Handling Spaces*.

(2) Cable Tray Systems. The provisions in (a) or (b) shall apply to the use of metallic cable tray systems in other spaces used for environmental air (plenums), where accessible, as follows:

(a) *Metal Cable Tray Systems.* Metal cable tray systems shall be permitted to support the wiring methods in 300.22(C)(1).

(b) *Solid Side and Bottom Metal Cable Tray Systems.* Solid side and bottom metal cable tray systems with solid metal covers shall be permitted to enclose wiring methods and cables, not already covered in 300.22(C)(1), in accordance with 392.10(A) and (B).

(3) Equipment. Electrical equipment with a metal enclosure, or electrical equipment with a nonmetallic enclosure listed for use within an air-handling space and having low smoke and heat release properties, and associated wiring material suitable for the ambient temperature shall be permitted to be installed in such other space unless prohibited elsewhere in this *Code*.

Informational Note: One method to determine low smoke and heat release properties is that the equipment exhibits a maximum peak optical density of 0.50 or less, an average optical density of 0.15 or less, and a peak heat release rate of 100kW or less when tested in accordance with ANSI/UL 2043-2013, *Fire Test for Heat and Visible Smoke Release for Discrete Products and Their Accessories Installed in Air-Handling Spaces*.

Exception: Integral fan systems shall be permitted where specifically identified for use within an air-handling space.

(D) Information Technology Equipment. Electrical wiring in air-handling areas beneath raised floors for information technology equipment shall be permitted in accordance with Article 645.