

## *ARE YOU BEING SCENTsitive? November 2003*

Have you ever planned to read that book you have been longing to get to, on a three or four hour airplane trip? You were nestled into your window seat, with the seat next to you vacant allowing you to spread out. Then, just before they closed the door, someone came rushing onto the plane, only to be seated right next to you. And, just as you took a deep breath to let out a heavy sigh, the strong smell of cologne/perfume penetrated your airway. I have had this experience. First, I felt offended that I was going to have to put up with such a strong, horrible smell for such a long trip. After some time had passed, I began to feel a headache and not long after I began to feel nauseated. By the time I reached my destination, all I wanted to do was go to bed. As far as I know, I do not suffer from MCS (multiple chemical sensitivity) and this is how much one person's perfume/cologne affected my body. Imagine being an MCS sufferer and feeling like that or worse, just because someone wearing perfume/cologne walked near or used the phone just before you.

Most people believe it is the smell that makes them feel unwell; but the harm is actually due to chemicals in the products. Thus the name, "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity", or "MCS". Other terminology used is "Environmental Illness", or "EI". Many products on the market contain fragrances, and many that say "fragrance free" often contain masking fragrances. One perfume may contain more than 500 chemicals. Laundry detergents, fabric softeners, dish-washing liquids, disinfectants, fragranced cleaners, soaps, shampoos and other hair products, deodorants, cosmetics, toothpaste, sunscreen lotions, incense, and lip balms are some examples of products which cause reactions. Three common chemicals in these scented products are cocoamide diethylalumine (e.g. shampoos, moisturizers), proylene glycol (e.g. deodorant, shampoos, shaving gel) and sodium lauryl sulfate and fluoride (e.g. detergents, shampoos, toothpaste).

MCS has been recognized only in recent years; and, information reviewed in preparation of this article state that MCS is not considered a "real" diagnosis. However, immunological tests and brain scans have shown abnormalities caused by chemical exposure with subsequent sensitivity. Low level exposure for a long time or exposure to a very high dose of chemicals once or twice, may cause someone to become sensitized to the chemical of exposure as well as to unrelated chemicals. Also, an individual may experience progressively worse reactions with multiple exposures. Symptoms may include sneezing, coughing, watery eyes, headache, dizziness and nausea. Some may have chronic fatigue, trouble focusing or thinking or remembering. Sudden mood changes or muscle cramps may occur. More severe reactions include asthma attacks, seizure or loss of consciousness.

The mechanisms by which chemical sensitivities occur are not known. Some people do not even know what triggered their sensitivity. In general, the body perceives the relatively harmless substance as a threat and the allergic response occurs. Inflammation and mucous production occurs to help fight the substance. The

inflammation and mucous production cause typical allergy symptoms. Very severe reactions such as anaphylaxis and death can occur. Some suggest that reactions to chemical irritants are less responsive to treatment than allergies and that avoidance is the primary way of preventing illness. Mounting evidence suggests that fragrances are a health concern for everyone and not just for those that are sensitive. It has also been suggested that the issue of fragrance will be as controversial in the future as is the tobacco smoke issue of today. The U.S. Postal Service passed a regulation in April 1990 stating: "a fragrance advertising sample is non mailable unless the sample meets the following requirement: It must be sealed, wrapped, treated, or otherwise prepared in a manner reasonably designed to prevent individuals from being unknowingly or involuntarily exposed to the sample." The California state-government passed a regulation stating: "Any fragrance advertising insert contained in a newspaper, magazine, mailing, or other periodically printed material shall contain only microencapsulated oils. Glue tabs or binders shall be used to prevent premature activation of the fragrance advertising insert." Some magazines now offer a "scent-free" version at the subscriber's request.

Poor indoor air quality has frequently been cited as being connected with respiratory problems. Especially with building technology used today to conserve energy by making buildings more airtight. These changes coupled with increased use of materials and products that add volatile compounds to the air add to the problems of air quality. But, of all the indoor air quality issues, "people pollution" is the most difficult to deal with. The rights of the individual, reasonable accommodation and employee relations all come into play. Allergy and allergy related diseases are major causes of illness and disability. These health conditions create lost time from work, lost productivity, increased health insurance costs, and workers compensation claims. These losses translate into costs to the employer but also frequently result in a cost to the employee coworkers. Although fragrances are not the sole cause of this type of health concern, they do contribute to them. Providing education to workers and implementing "Fragrance Free" policies assist in making the work environment healthier. In order for such a policy to work it must have the cooperation and support of both the employer and the employees. To the individual, most changes cost very little monetarily but do involve changes in personal habits. As a result, one of the first steps in implementing such a policy must be education. Next, a workable policy must be developed with clear guidelines to handle problems that may arise. Also, a means for mediating when problems arise must be included. It is suggested that a list reasonable alternatives to personal offending products be made available. Transition time is also required in the implementation of such a policy. Periodic review of the policy to determine its effectiveness would also be prudent. In addition, the employer must also be aware of maintenance products used in the workplace. Carpet and other materials should be evaluated before purchasing to be certain off gassing will not be a problem. Glues and materials used in the manufacture of carpets are often a source of formaldehyde and other volatile emissions. Carpet cleaner may add to the load of indoor air pollutants.

Protect yourself and those with MCS. Stop using any product known to be toxic and stop using scented products. And, if a friend who suffers from MCS states that what you are wearing makes them sick, believe them even though it does not seem to have a fragrance to you. In some cases it may take days to become unscented. Your clothes may have to be washed more than once. Also, if you are planning to visit with someone you know as being chemically sensitive, do not stop at a self-serve gasoline pump on your way.

Remember, when you choose to wear scented products, you are choosing to impact the air space of others, possibly in ways you may not be able to predict or control. Avoid misunderstandings by remembering that a non-fragrance request is not about you as a person nor about the smell. The request is really about chemical sensitivity.

#### Works Consulted:

1. McCampbell, Ann. MULTIPLE CHEMICAL SENSITIVITIES UNDER SIEGE. <http://users.lanminds.com/~wilworks/ehnlx/mcssiege.htm>
2. No Perfume Means Healthier Air! <http://www.ourlittleplace.com/noperfume.html>
3. Rigsby, Roberta. Fragrance-Free Encounters and No-Fragrance Spaces Not Just a Personal Preference, but a Vital Matter of Health. <http://ourlittleplace.com/fragfree.html>
4. Kendall, Julia. Twenty Most Common Chemicals in Thirty-one Fragrance Products [based on a 1991 EPA Study]. <http://www.ourlittleplace.com/chemicals.html>
5. Hoffman, Michelle. IN DEPTH: HUMAN RESOURCES What's that smell? <http://sanjose.bizjournals.com/sanjose/stories/2003/06/02/focus1.html>
6. Nelson, Eric. The MCS Debate: A Medical Streetfight. <http://www.speakeasy.org/wfp/08/Boeing4.html>
7. INDOOR AIR QUALITY. <http://www.ameliaww.com/fpin/IndoorAir.htm>
8. Health Conditions Effected by Fragrances. <http://www.ameliaww.com/fpin/HealthFragWk.htm>
9. Economic Considerations. <http://www.ameliaww.com/fpin/ecoConsid.htm>
10. WORKPLACE POLICIES. <http://www.ameliaww.com/fpin/WkPol.htm>
11. Scents & Sensitivity. Environmental Health Perspectives, Volume 106, December 12, 1998. <http://ehpnet1.niehs.nih.gov/docs/1998/106-12/focus.html>
12. Fragrances and the Workplace. <http://www.ameliaww.com/fpin/FragWk.htm>
13. Fragrance Sensitivity. Beware of the Terms Fragrance Free and Unscented. <http://allergies.about.com/library/weekly/aa022299.htm>
14. DeFreitas Saab, Tracie. JAN Work-Site Accommodation Ideas for Individuals Who Experience Limitations Due to Chemical Sensitivity or Environmental Illness (EI). <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media/MCS.html>
15. Work-site Accommodation Ideas for Individuals Who Experience Limitations Due To Fragrance Sensitivity. <http://www.geocities.com/fragranceallergy/JANWebWorkplacePolicies.html>
16. E-TOOLS for Risk Managers. DHMH Risk Management Program 201 Preston St. Room 111, Baltimore MD 21201. [www.dhmh.state.md.us/psa/riskmgt/](http://www.dhmh.state.md.us/psa/riskmgt/)