



The Invisible Environment Fact Sheet Series

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Multiple Chemical Sensitivity

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A trend noted by many people has been an increase in what seems to be allergic reactions in the general population. Problems such as congestion, sneezing, rashes, difficulties in breathing, and others have all been reported as reactions to non-naturally occurring chemicals in the environment. This condition has had many names in the past, including Chemical Injury, Chemical Sensitivity and Environmental Illness. It is now referred to as Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) by the general population and now, physicians have labeled it as Idiopathic Environmental Intolerance.

What Is MCS?

In theory, MCS is an adverse physical reaction to low levels of many common chemicals. The National Institute of Health has defined MCS as a “chronic recurring disease caused by a person’s inability to tolerate an environmental chemical or class of foreign chemicals.” Many who suffer from MCS complain of severe sensitivity or allergic reactions to different pollutants such as solvents, smoke, diesel, and sometimes even pet fur and dander.

Is MCS a True Disease?

One of the difficulties in classifying MCS as a true disease or illness has been the complex nature of chemicals in the environment and the interaction effects with and within the human body. However, these effects are not consistent among all people and not isolated to only MCS. Most symptoms actually are more common to other established illnesses, diseases, stress, and stimuli. The vague nature of this condition has prompted researchers

to isolate reasons why MCS should be questioned as a disease. They are as follows:

1. There is no known cause for MCS.
2. Symptoms vary tremendously from one patient to the next.
3. Symptoms that have been labeled as those of MCS have also been identified as common to other illnesses.
4. Many MCS patients have psychiatric problems already.
5. Treatments do not work.

However, researchers who support MCS have been able to address each of these concerns stating that this illness must be compared with allergic and disease patterns, tests, and triggers. If handled in this manner, then MCS as a disease becomes more credible. The remainder of this fact sheet will discuss MCS as a disease and what people can look for and do.

Common Physical Symptoms of MCS

As stated above, many symptoms of MCS mimic other illnesses. The more common reactions to watch for include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Stinging eyes
- Wheezing
- Breathlessness
- Nausea
- Extreme fatigue, lethargy
- Headache, migraine, vertigo, dizziness
- poor memory and concentration
- runny nose

Diagnosing MCS

Certain criteria have been isolated in determining if a patient truly suffers from MCS. These criteria include the following:

- Symptoms are reproducible with repeated exposure.
- The condition is chronic.
- Both high and low levels of exposure to the trigger result in the same symptoms.
- The symptoms improve or resolve completely when the triggers are removed.
- Responses often occur to unrelated substances.
- Symptoms attack more than one organ or area of the body.

Treatment for MCS

Since symptoms of MCS and levels of reactions are so varied, there is no one medical treatment that seems to work on all patients. Many doctors, psychologists, and psychiatrists believe that avoidance of the trigger all together is the only consistent treatment. Other possible treatments include education, better nutritional practices, immune system enhancements, and diagnosing the patient's mental health, although none of these has proved consistent among all patients.

Children and MCS

As with many illnesses, children seem to be more susceptible to various triggers than adults. MCS is no exception. Many patients who are believed to suffer from MCS as adults were exposed to significant amounts of chemicals when they were younger. Throughout their young lives, children are constantly exposed to a variety of common chemicals that may actually be the cause of symptoms that don't actually show up until their adult years. Infants and young children are always playing on the floor or carpet, in the sand or dirt, and even on a driveway. They are exposed to a myriad of chemicals and residue that we as adults take for granted. They also ingest quite a few of these chemicals because many are at a stage when they are exploring their own bodies, and fingers and toes often end up in mouths. Children also breathe more air per pound of body weight than adults do, as well as eat and drink more than adults per pound of body weight. These are important statistics to pay attention to because so many chemicals are in our air, water, and food. While the end result of this may not be immediate, it could potentially show up later in life as research has shown.

What are the most common irritant sources that can be found in the home or office?

The following is a list of some of the most common chemicals to which some people are most likely to have sensitivity:

- Gas fumes
- Formaldehyde
- Paint fumes
- Cleaning products
- Furniture polish
- Perfumes
- Sugar
- Aspirin
- Cigarette smoke
- Tap water

Making Appropriate Purchasing Decisions

Professionals in the field agree that the one treatment for MCS that is the most relevant and consistent is avoiding the trigger completely. This is one area that individuals do have some control over. Educating oneself about purchasing choices when it comes to cleaners, medicines, water, and even food is something that is very important in controlling MCS. The onset of companies offering "natural," "organic," or "eco-friendly" products makes this even easier if one is willing to do the proper research. Literally thousands of web sites are available to help individuals with this task. Here are some tips on making the appropriate purchasing decisions:

- Pay attention to the types of chemicals used in a product.
- Are the chemicals listed naturally occurring or synthetic? Keep track of individual reactions to each.
- Is there a likelihood for interaction effects (especially among different cleansers that could be used in one room that may actually react with each other)?
- Fragrances and dyes used in products (including "clean scents" such as synthetic lemon, pine, floral, etc.).
- Be aware of natural vs. synthetic fabrics and materials and individual reactions to each.

Conclusion

Whether indoors or out, in the city or the country, the mountains or the desert, all of us are continually exposed to chemicals. Both natural and synthetic chemicals are a

part of our lives. Most of us are unaware of our dependence on various chemicals and how much we rely on them to make our lives easier. Whether or not MCS will ever be identified as a “real” illness, the discussion about MCS suggests that there may be a concern in our society that has to be examined. We use and depend on chemicals; often we overuse chemicals and ignore the impacts from using these chemicals. It is important for us, as a society, to be aware of the chemicals we use and the harm that their misuse and overuse can cause—not only directly to our environment, but indirectly to human health.

Helpful Resources

www.multiplechemicalsensitivity.org
www.mcs-global.org
www.mcs-america.org
www.niehs.nih.gov/external/faq/mcss.htm
www.mcsrr.org

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