

SCENT FREE

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Definition

The Canadian Human Rights Commission defined environmental sensitivities as:

- a chronic (i.e. continuing for more than three months) multisystem disorder, usually involving symptoms of the central nervous system and at least one other system.

Affected persons are frequently intolerant to some foods and they react adversely to some chemicals and to environmental agents, singly or in combination, at levels generally tolerated by the majority... Improvement is associated with avoidance of suspected agents and symptoms recur with re-exposure.

What is It?

- It is a physical reaction to a chemical in the environment
- Symptoms can be extremely variable
- Onset may be abrupt or gradual
- Specific initiating exposure may not be identifiable
- Symptoms are relieved by leaving the area or avoiding contact with the substance
- It is not specifically related to “scents” or to an unpleasant smell
- **NOTE:** It is a reaction to a chemical exposure, not to an unpleasant smell.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)

- “An acquired disorder, characterized by recurrent symptoms, referable to multiple organ systems, occurring in response to demonstrable exposures to many chemically unrelated compounds at doses far below those established to cause harmful effects.”

Cullen

- MCS is an extreme form of chemical sensitivity in which the individual has become sensitized to multiple substances

Other names: 20th century disease, environmental illness, idiopathic environmental intolerance, environmental sensitivities & others

Symptoms

- Headaches
 - Dizziness, lightheadedness
 - Nausea
 - Fatigue
 - Weakness
 - Insomnia
 - Malaise
 - Confusion
 - Loss of Appetite
 - Depression
 - Anxiety
 - Numbness
 - Upper Respiratory Symptoms
 - Shortness of breath
 - Difficulty Concentrating
 - Skin Irritation
- Allergic and asthmatic patients, as well as those with other conditions, report that certain odours, even in the smallest amounts, can trigger an attack.
 - The severity of these symptoms can vary. Some people report mild irritation while others are incapacitated and/or must give up many “normal” activities in order to avoid exposure (such as going to public places).

Symptoms Can Be Triggered By

- shampoo and conditioners
- hairsprays
- deodorants
- colognes & aftershaves
- fragrances & perfumes
- lotions & creams
- potpourri
- industrial and household chemicals
- soaps
- cosmetics
- air fresheners & deodorizers
- oils
- candles
- diapers
- some types of garbage bags

Unscented or Fragrance-Free

- **Does this really mean there is no fragrance?**
 - No. Even products labeled "unscented" or "fragrance-free" may actually contain fragrances used to mask the smell of certain ingredients. Health Canada has specific rules about how companies can use these words on their labels. [According to Health Canada's labeling regulations](#), "fragrance free" or "unscented" means that there have been no fragrances added to the cosmetic product, **or** that a masking agent has been added in order to hide the scents from the other ingredients in the cosmetic.

What Can Be Done?

- Avoidance of triggering substance is the only specific therapy, although antihistamines may give symptomatic relief in some cases.
- Identification of triggering substances may require assistance of others
- Communication is essential to successful problem-solving when the affected person notices that they are experiencing symptoms

Communicating Concerns

- Focus on respect and dignity
- Speak directly to individuals in the area who might be able to help identify the triggering substance
- Ensure the approach is non-confrontational and non-blaming – you are asking for help to resolve a problem

You Personally Can

- If you are an employee who is wearing a scented product(s) and you are approached by another employee or your supervisor:
 - Do not take the request to refrain from using scented products as a personal affront — this is about the impact of chemicals on people, not about you.
 - Work with others to find out what product or products are causing the reaction.
 - Educate yourself about the need for a scent-free program.
 - Become part of the solution and switch to fragrance-free products.

It Matters Because

In Canada today more than one in four individuals suffer from respiratory disease. A full 40% of these individuals have allergic trigger to their disease. Medical evidence clearly shows that scented products are harmful to the health of sensitive individuals. In sufficient concentrations scented products may be harmful to those with allergies, environmental sensitivity or chronic heart or lung disease.

It Matters Because

- The degree of discomfort experienced by sensitive individuals in a scented environment depends on their
 - personal sensitivity and the concentrations of the various chemicals in their vicinity A significant percentage of the population (those suffering from existing respiratory disease) is hypersensitive to scented products. Even most non-sensitive individuals suffer from eye and nose irritation at low concentrations of these chemical irritants.
- The concentration of irritants is related to the:
 - number of scented products present
 - size of room
 - proportion of fresh air
 - efficiency of air-cleaning equipment
 - effectiveness of air-mixing in the room
 - absorption characteristics of building materials and furnishings.

It Matters Because

- Accommodation is required under the Federal and Provincial Human Rights Acts. For example, according to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC):
 - "This medical condition is a disability and those living with environmental sensitivities are entitled to the protection of the Canadian Human Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability. The Canadian Human Rights Commission will receive any inquiry and process any complaint from any person who believes that he or she has been discriminated against because of an environmental sensitivity. Like others with a disability, those with environmental sensitivities are required by law to be accommodated.
- The CHRC encourages employers and service providers to proactively address issues of accommodation by ensuring that their workplaces and facilities are accessible for persons with a wide range of disabilities."
- Source: [Canadian Human Rights Commission](#)

It Matters Because:

It is In Our Dress Code Policy:

SCENTED PRODUCTS

Individual facilities may choose to designate their facility as “scent free zones”. Fragrances and other scented hygiene products shall not be used/worn by staff in designated scent free zones.

References

- http://www.nb.lung.ca/html/Programs/Indoor_Air_Quality/scents.htm
- © 2007 New Brunswick Lung Association.
- © 2011 Canadian Lung Association.
- http://www.lung.ca/protect-protegez/pollution-pollution/indoor-interieur/scents-parfums_e.php

Bernice Irvine RN, COHN, CDMP

Manager, Occupational Health

Winnipeg Regional Health Authority

