

[Myths and Facts About Chemical Sensitivity]

Myth: Chemical sensitivity is just an allergy, right?

Fact: Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, or MCS, is a progressive disease that can result in death. Asthma, which often causes sensitivity to fragrance-containing products, can also result in death. People with MCS suffer extreme and sometimes progressive injury from chemical and fragrance exposures. Filter masks, portable oxygen, and other measures do not prevent most exposures.

Myth: So what if people don't like the way I smell? It's my body.

Fact: MCS is not a smell preference but a disability. Fragrances aren't merely "nice smells" and they don't stay confined to an air space. Dryer sheets, which were found in an EPA study to contain chloroform, can contaminate whole neighborhoods. Fragrances contain carcinogens and neurotoxins that cause health problems, and these chemicals linger on skin and clothes for weeks after use. According to the Environmental Health Coalition of Western Massachusetts, 95% of the chemicals used in fragrances are neurotoxic, including benzene derivatives, aldehydes and other toxins and sensitizers capable of causing cancer, asthma, fatigue, organ damage, and other health problems.

Myth: I use natural shampoo and don't wear cologne, so I am scent free.

Fact: "Natural" is a loose term these days. Toxic synthetic fragrances are in most body care products, including many at the health food store labeled "natural." Even some items labeled "unscented" contain a masking fragrance, which is a synthetic fragrance to cover up the smells of the product. Essential oils are also a problem for chemically sensitive people. You are not scent free unless you only use natural products labeled "fragrance free" or "unscented."

Myth: But I really like my scents. Can't we just negotiate a situation where I get to wear some scents so everyone wins? Why do I have to make all the sacrifices?

Fact: People fall into the "negotiation" trap a lot with the disabled, particularly those with non-apparent disabilities. Imagine how ridiculous this argument would sound if you used it on someone in a wheelchair: "Hey Bob, can't we just negotiate and build the ramp halfway up the stairs?" There's no halfway about disability. Invisible disabilities may seem vague, negotiable, or flexible to you, but they are not to the people who are disabled. People with invisible disabilities can't be flexible about their limitations any more than a person with a spinal cord injury can get up and walk on command.

Myth: People with MCS can just gather in their own venues.

Fact: The sickest MCS patients are barred from public parks (where pesticides are present), stores, churches, medical facilities, schools, street fairs, homeless shelters, public transportation, courthouses, libraries, airplanes, public meetings, and almost everywhere else you can imagine. They are often driven out of their own homes. Many end up living in tents, trailers, or cars.

Myth: If someone with MCS got sick from my products, he would tell me.

Fact: People with MCS are so disenfranchised, and so used to be ridiculed or ignored, that they may not ask for what they need. Furthermore, they might not be able to get close enough to you to ask, or they might be experiencing cognitive problems that make it hard for them to communicate.

Myth: It is too hard to make an event fragrance free.

Fact: Every turn toward social justice is initially hard. It does take extra work to plan a scent-free event, but remember, people with MCS and other disabilities don't have a choice in these matters. Others do have a choice. If they don't want to give up scented products for the sake of a scent-free event, they might miss one event, but that event will likely be the only accessible event for a long time for most people with MCS. If you plan a scent-free event, you will also be setting a precedent for the next event and building social momentum.

Myth: Asking people to buy a bunch of new products to be scent-free is classist.

Fact: Being scent-free can be achieved through the use of common household items such as baking soda, gelatin, olive oil, and unscented glycerin soap. Also, you'll most likely be fighting against classism if you stand up against ableism. The working poor in our country are often the most likely individuals to be exposed to the type of occupational hazards that tend to cause MCS, such as pesticides, solvents, and industrial chemicals.

Myth: Why should everyone have to make a change to help a small minority?

Fact: That statement is a tired historical argument used to fight any attempt to end discrimination against any minority. According to the Environmental Health Coalition of Western Massachusetts, one in five people experience health problems when exposed to fragrances, and 72% of asthmatics have adverse reactions to perfume. The Fragranced Product Information Network reports that 17 million people have asthma, 35 million have chronic sinus problems, 9 million have rhinitis, 25 million have migraines, and 1-2 percent of the population have skin allergies -- all can be negatively affected by fragrance. Categorical exclusion of disabled people is no different from the categorical exclusion of a group based on race, class, or gender identity. People with chemical sensitivity don't want to make a political statement: they want to survive a world of chemical assault.

Myth: Aren't people with MCS overreacting? It's just laundry detergent.

Fact: When you wear scents around a person with MCS, you have just inadvertently inflicted physical harm and conveyed the message that a "fresh clean scent" is so important that you don't care if a friend spends months in bed because of it. People with MCS are used to facing denial, anger, combativeness, and outright aggression when they ask for accommodation, and they need you as an ally. Truly, people with MCS are reacting to almost everything -- physically -- because our society is so laden with chemical products that it is nearly impossible to avoid them. Instead of pathologizing the reaction of someone with MCS, why not ask yourself why you would choose the contents of a plastic bottle over a person you love? Why not ask how you would feel if you had to give up your job, your relationships, your house, your physical functionality, and your security in the world instead of just your hair gel? Why not ask what you can do to create a better society for victims of chemical injury?

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