

Multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS)

What is MCS?

Some people experience adverse effects when exposed to chemicals. About 16% of the SA adult population report some form of sensitivity to one or a few chemicals. However, there is a group (about 1% of the adult population) that reports having Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). This is a medical condition where people experience a range of symptoms, sometimes in a debilitating way, from associated exposure to very low levels of common chemicals found in the environment, food or cosmetics.

What causes MCS?

The exact cause of MCS is unknown. Some have suggested that a challenge or stress sometime prior to a high dose of a chemical may trigger the condition. Others associate MCS symptoms with long-term, low dose chemical exposure.

Chemicals often associated with initiating MCS include pesticides, solvents, petrochemicals and harsh cleaning agents. Once MCS develops, a range of symptoms can occur triggered by a wide variety of seemingly unrelated chemicals, often at very low levels.

The types of chemicals or triggers to which people with MCS are sensitive vary considerably. These may be in food, drink, cleaning and disinfectant products, perfumes, aftershaves, personal hygiene and hair care products worn by other people. Herbicides, in particular glyphosate, are often identified by those with MCS as potent triggers.

What are the symptoms of MCS?

MCS is accompanied by a significant number of symptoms. Common symptoms include respiratory and flu like symptoms, fatigue, confusion, depression, muscle and joint pain, headaches, nausea, abdominal pain, dizziness and memory problems.

These and other symptoms may be experienced with an intensity that may range from moderate to severe in some sufferers. At worst, these may lead to profound disability for various periods.

How is MCS diagnosed?

There is no systematic method to diagnose MCS. This is because the exact cause is not known and there is no single test that can be done to diagnose the condition. Although chemicals are often linked to the worsening of the condition, a diagnosis of "medically unexplained symptoms" is often given.

If you are an MCS sufferer, your doctor will also ensure you are not suffering from other disorders or syndromes that may have similar symptoms but are treated differently. For example, if it is thought that allergy plays a part, then identifying the allergen is part of the diagnosis. Therefore, the doctor will take a very careful history, perhaps over a number of visits, in order to ascertain the likely causes.

The doctor will also perform a physical examination and may do some laboratory tests or other tests. Much of the diagnosis will require you to keep a careful history of what types of odours, chemicals or environments (certain rooms or locations) that may be associated with recent bouts of the symptoms.

What can be done about MCS?

There is no treatment for MCS, although doctors provide a range of support mechanisms and deal with individual symptoms.

The best method of dealing with MCS appears to be ensuring that the environment which sensitive people inhabit is not polluted with chemicals that worsen the condition. They often also need to avoid certain foods, drugs and cosmetic items.

A good place to start is to create a room at home where there are no substances that trigger the symptoms. A range of options such as nutritional supplementation and desensitisation therapies have been recommended by some. However, many of these have not been proven to be beneficial. A doctor knowledgeable in MCS can assist in seeking alternative remedies.

Creating a healthier environment

Reducing exposure to chemicals improves the health of those with MCS. Better air quality, in particular good building ventilation, helps all with chemical sensitivities. The following are ways to create a healthier environment:

- > Avoid pesticides: use an integrated pest management system
- > Avoid newly built or remodelled buildings
- > Avoid new paint and solvent-based stains and transparent finishes
- > Avoid new carpets
- > Avoid petrol, diesel, solvent, dry-cleaning, and bitumen fumes

- > Avoid tobacco smoke and vehicle exhaust
- > Use least toxic, natural, and unscented cleaning, laundry, and sanitizing products
- > Avoid perfume, cologne, and scented personal care products
- > Avoid air "freshener" sprays, incense, and fragrance-emitting devices
- > Use electric utilities or radiant heat
- > Open windows, ventilate buildings with clean fresh air and/or use portable room air filters.

Other resources

ME/CFS Australia (SA) Inc.

<http://www.sacfs.asn.au/mcs/index.htm>

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