

# Multiple Chemical Sensitivity



**MCS-AWARE**  
The charity for environmental illness

## What is it?

Thousands of people in the UK suffer from some form of chemical sensitivity and many hundreds of thousands are affected worldwide. Some experience minor reactions to chemical substances in shampoo or cleaning products while others develop life-threatening intolerances to virtually all synthetic, petrochemical and some natural materials. Those that react to several types of chemicals are said to have Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS).

## Who Does it Affect?

Anyone can develop chemical sensitivity regardless of age or background. MCS can begin when the immune system is depressed, for instance after a viral infection or as a result of extreme stress. It can start after a large exposure to one toxic substance as in a chemical spillage, or even as a result of long-term exposure to very low-level toxins. Many people who are diagnosed with M.E. or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome find their symptoms are exacerbated by chemical and food intolerance. Chemical sensitivity is also common amongst soldiers with Gulf War Syndrome.

## Symptoms

Symptoms are diverse and vary according to the individual and the type and strength of chemical exposure. Some people experience ulcers, rashes, mood changes, nausea or exhaustion while others suffer serious breathing problems or collapse. Symptoms usually affect multiple organ systems. Reactions are cumulative and sufferers usually find general tolerance levels worsen after chemical exposures. Medical practitioners do not yet know how or why the body is affected.

## The Allergic / Toxic Load

Sufferers often find their reactions and levels of sensitivity vary from day to day, which makes the illness difficult to explain to family and friends. However it is usually because of previous chemical exposures or extra stress on the immune system - the allergic/ toxic load. The effects of chemical sensitivity are often cumulative, as if the body can only cope with a certain quota of toxins and allergies each week. The quota will be severely reduced if the body is already dealing with food intolerances, environmental allergies, other illness, tiredness or stress. People who use up their 'detoxification quota' one week are likely to find their symptoms exacerbated the following week, possibly triggered by something that is not normally a problem. It is therefore important to avoid as many food, chemical and environmental allergens as possible.

## Diagnosis

There is no single test available to confirm Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, however there are tests that can identify types of poisoning, determine the efficiency of organ functions or measure deficiencies in overall health. Some non-medical tests claim to diagnose chemical, environmental and food intolerances, but none have yet proved 100% effective for all people. Since reactions are usually reproducible, diagnosis is often made as a result of patient observation – it is useful to keep a diary of reactions and exposures.

## Treatment

Just as there is no single diagnostic test, there is no one magical cure. Everyone's circumstances are different, but most people benefit from some sort of gentle detoxification and treatment to improve immune function or treat underlying illness. Above all it is important to avoid the offending chemical or environmental allergens to give the body time to recover.

## Recovery

There are no official statistics for recovery but given the right information and support many people do see improvements in their health. Some recover fully, while others are left with residual sensitivities. With a suitable approach, patients commonly experience a gradual decrease in symptoms over several years.

### Strategies for Recovery

Once problem chemicals or environmental allergens have been identified, it is vital to remove as many as possible from the home environment. If this is not practical, at least ensure one room is made into a 'safe', chemical free oasis; the bedroom is ideal as it is the place you are likely to spend the most time. A low-allergy bedroom should also improve the quality of sleep and therefore speed up healing.

- Use unfragranced products. Where possible fragranced products, cleaners and perfumes should be removed from the house. Otherwise place in air-tight containers and put a rolled up towel at the base of the door to prevent petrochemical odours drifting into the bedroom.
- Consider changing to environmentally friendly brands of toiletries and detergents - washing up liquid, washing powder etc. - as these are less likely to contain petrochemicals.
- Before sleeping unplug and switch off all electrical gadgets, phones and WiFi.
- Remove as many chemicals from your diet as you can; wash or peel fruit and vegetables and choose organic wholefoods. Most people benefit from consulting an experienced nutritionist.

### Common MCS Irritants

#### **Formaldehyde is often found in:**

Mdf, chipboard and other compressed hardboards  
Laminated furniture or floorings made of compressed woods  
Fumes from radiator paint and cigarettes  
Non-iron or easy-care fabrics and new textiles  
Paper and cardboard

#### **Chlorine is often found in:**

Domestic water supplies  
Bleach disinfectants, bleached papers and textiles  
Swimming pools

#### **Plasticizers are often found in:**

Any flexible plastic, including carrier bags, bin bags, CD and DVD cases  
Food packaging  
Acrylic based paints

#### **Solvents are often found in:**

Paints, varnish, marker pens, some adhesives, newspaper print, shiny paper

#### **Petrochemicals and Fragrances are particularly problematic in:**

Toiletries such as shampoo, soap, moisturiser, deodorant etc  
Washing powder  
Household cleaners  
Water based creosotes,  
Objects made of new plastic or polystyrene  
Perfume or essential oils  
Airborne particles from synthetic fabrics  
Treatments on the surface of new clothing

#### **Combustion Gases include:**

Natural gas and any type of smoke, including frying food, cigarettes and exhaust fumes

#### **Electromagnetic Fields (EMFs):**

Any electrical appliance including mobile phones and microwaves,  
non-wired telephones and internet connections.  
Hypersensitive sufferers may even react to battery-powered items.

#### **Chemicals in Food and Drink:**

Sufferers are often affected by pesticide residues and synthetic additives. Hypersensitive people and those with Candida may also react to natural moulds and yeasts.

Much more information including how to create a low-allergy bedroom and help for food and electro-sensitivities is available at [www.mcs-aware.org](http://www.mcs-aware.org). Email: [info@mcs-aware.org](mailto:info@mcs-aware.org)  
Or: MCS-Aware, 15 Intech House, Wilbury Way, Hitchin, Herts. SG4 0TW (UK)

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