

Advice for Staff (and Patients) to Minimize Use of Personal Scented Products in Health Care Settings

Medical Facilities Addressing MCS and Similar Conditions

Health care settings are establishing policies to minimize chemical exposures for people with Multiple Chemical Sensitivities (MCS) and other similar health conditions. The goal is to prevent patients (and staff) from being exposed to unnecessary chemicals, including those found in many fragranced products used by staff, housekeeping products and other sources. For example, many health facilities no longer use scented products to launder linens. An increasing number of health care facilities, including hospitals and private offices, are establishing fragrance policies for staff and some for patients as well.

One hospital¹ has a special protocol concerning how to provide appropriate treatment to patients who are made ill by exposures to chemicals, including those found in most fragrances. This policy includes:

- Providing unscented linens for affected patients
- Filtering the air in rooms with affected patients
- Asking medical staff to refrain from being scented when caring for such patients.
- Other special precautions to protect patients from exposures to fragrances and chemicals.

Exposure to Fragrance Chemicals Can Cause Health Effects

Health facilities are responding to an identified need by patients and staff because of the immediate and long-term health consequences they suffer when exposed to fragrances and other chemicals. These products include, but are not limited to, fragranced products of all kinds (perfumes/colognes, lotions, body spray, scented hair products, scented laundry products, etc.) some essential oils, scented products such as dry erase markers and hand sanitizers, cleaning supplies with bleach and other toxic ingredients, new building materials and carpeting, pesticides and herbicides and paint fumes—among others. Any of these products may contain synthetic chemicals that can cause many people to develop symptoms when exposed to them.

Negative health effects can involve multiple organ systems. Physical symptoms in response to short-term exposures can range from mild to intense in some individuals but often include:

- Nausea
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Mild headaches to severe migraines
- Sinusitis (including chronic)
- Asthma, lung irritations and other lung complications

¹ Providence St. Peter Hospital in Olympia, WA

- Sore throat and hoarseness
- Cognitive dysfunction (“fuzzy thinking”)
- Heart palpitations and arrhythmias
- Inflammation of skin, joints, GI tract, and airways
- Seizures and other neurological issues
- Anaphylactic shock and angioedema
- Lowered immune function

Chronic, low level exposures to chemicals and fragrance exposures stress the immune system and damage the endocrine and nervous systems. Thus, they have been implicated in many serious health conditions including cancers of many kinds (especially of the breast, reproductive system, brain, thyroid and lungs), birth defects (especially sex organ malformations), autism, ADHD, dementia and even obesity and diabetes.

Therefore, when patients enter the hospital or clinic for medical attention, it is imperative to minimize their exposure to chemicals, including staff fragrances, to ensure that their health is not compromised further.

What patients are negatively affected by synthetic chemicals and fragrances?

Anyone who has been injured by major chemical exposures in the past (such as veterans with Gulf War Syndrome, 9/11 first responders at the World Trade Center or individuals exposed to a chemical spill) may be permanently “sensitized” to any additional exposures to the same or similar chemicals. People with severe allergies may react to particular substances found in scented products. Some pregnant women, individuals with liver damage, patients undergoing chemotherapy or dialysis, or others whose bodies are already struggling to process and clear toxins from their systems may be more reactive to exposures to additional synthetic chemicals.

Increasing Amounts of Fragrance Are Found in Many Products Today

Most fragrances on the market today are made of synthetic (artificial) substances, not natural ones, and one of the most prevalent sources of chemical exposures. Once you start reading labels on various products, it is shocking to see that fragrances are ubiquitous in our culture. We don’t often realize where or even what they are, since the manufacturers are not regulated by any government agency or required to disclose what is in their products.

Also, synthetic fragrances actually bind chemically with objects in our living environments such as furniture at home and work, clothing, car seats, our hair and skin, etc. and can be difficult to remove.

Therefore, any of us can become transmitters of toxic synthetic chemicals inadvertently via our fragrance use, thus harming ourselves and others.

Below is a list of products that typically contain synthetic fragrance chemicals. Although fragrance free alternatives of the following products are available, most people use scented versions of the following products (often in addition to perfumes, colognes and body sprays):

- Laundry detergents, fabric softeners and “boosters”
- Dryer sheets (unscented drier sheets are available in most grocery stores)
- Air “fresheners” in buildings and vehicles (i.e., which are perfumes to mask other scents)
- Candles
- Hand sanitizers
- Shampoos, conditioners, styling gels, and other hair products
- Body products such as lotions, moisturizers and shaving crèmes
- Deodorant
- Hand and body soaps (or “washes”)

What does it really mean to be “fragrance free”?

Work policies are usually vaguely worded and often not specific enough to help employees understand what it really means to be “unscented” or “fragrance free.” For example, many organizational policies state simply that “employees should refrain from wearing perfumes, scented lotions or other overpowering fragrances.” What’s not spelled out for employees is that “perfume” is often one of the ingredients in many products, typically described on a label as “fragrance” or “parfum,” if listed at all.

Also, whether a fragrance is strong or “overpowering” is subjective: that is, in the nose of the beholder, not the wearer. Many people who wear scented products cannot reliably judge the level of their own scented products, because their sense of smell has been damaged by long-term or heavy exposure to the synthetic chemicals in fragrances.

Increasingly, however, health care settings are making their policies more specific such as: *“In consideration of individuals who are made ill by exposure to chemical fragrances, **staff will refrain from wearing or using any noticeably scented personal products**, such as perfumes, cologne, body spray, lotions, laundry products including detergents, softeners and dryer strips, hair products including shampoos, conditioners, gels and sprays, or air fresheners that leave detectable scent in their personal belongings, etc.”*

Even the perfume industry recommends that their products should be used in such a way as to not be detected by others within 3 feet of the user. Since health care professionals frequently must be in close contact with or have prolonged exposure to patients and other staff to carry out work responsibilities, their work calls for even higher standards—that is, any scent used by health care staff should be undetectable by others. (Staff not involved directly in patient care also affect building air quality.)

We Recognize That Minimizing Fragrance Use Is a Challenge

“Scent sensitive” patients understand that it is challenging to avoid using these products to prepare for caring for them in the hospital or clinic. It takes effort to de-scent one’s self and belongings and to buy appropriate products when so many everyday products contain fragrances (*see the questions and answers that follow for advice on how to de-scent*).

In addition, we recognize that wearing scented products is often a pleasurable experience for some individuals. Having worn perfume in the past ourselves, we understand that fragrance may be important to a person’s identity, body image or self-esteem.

We are Grateful

We and other scent-sensitive patients and their caregivers are so very thankful for the cooperation of medical staff. Some management, nurses, technicians, and other staff are very receptive to our concerns and show consideration about the needs of such patients. We are grateful for the extra effort medical professionals put forth before coming to work to minimize the scent they carry to ensure that the health of the MCS patients and other affected individuals isn’t further compromised.

Here are a few common questions regarding minimizing the exposure of patients to fragrance.

1. **Question: How can I remove these chemicals from my hair and skin before coming to work?**

Answer: Because the chemicals of scent cling to the skin and hair for several days when used on a regular basis, as well as to your clothing and other belongings, it is good to refrain from using scented products for several days; the longer the better.

To de-scent the hair, it is best to wash your hair in unscented products for several days to a week. To quickly de-scent the hair, some people use a paste of baking soda to wash their hair followed with a rinse with clear water. Rinsing the hair with acidic substances (such as orange juice or apple cider vinegar) also works great to neutralize chemicals in hair but, if you decide to try this method, don’t forget to warm up cold juice before getting into the shower!

Another, less effective option is to wash the hair (without any product) using plain water that is as warm/hot as you can stand it. The heat helps to remove chemicals from the hair. Follow with a cool rinse, which will make your hair feel soft.

For the skin, taking a shower with an unscented soap or at least showering with very warm, clear water, and not putting on any fragrance for as many days as possible will help. Please don’t apply any gel or hair styling products, since most are highly scented.

We know that taking measures such as these can be an additional burden for you, but it can mean saving a patient (or co-worker) from getting nauseated, having a migraine headache for several days, having an asthma attack or other physical reactions while interacting with you.

2. **Question: How do I get chemical fragrance scent out of my clothes?**

Answer: Hanging clothes in fresh air and sunshine after washing them in baking soda or Borax or both is one of the most effective methods, but it can take days or weeks to completely remove fragrance already embedded in fabric, especially those made of synthetic materials. Putting dry, scented clothes in an unscented dryer on medium heat (to speed up offgassing) can help de-scent clean clothes that have absorbed scents from other clothes or from being worn in public places or other locations with scent (like a vehicle that has air fresheners in it).

To remove chemicals from new or scented clothes, soak them overnight in a load with a cup of vinegar to neutralize the chemicals in them. Then run them through a rinse cycle to remove the chemicals, followed by washing them in fragrance free (also called “free and clear”) detergent or plain soap, with baking soda and/or Borax added to the wash cycle (the baking soda also neutralizes chemicals). Repeat the process until no scent can be detected. (Note: if you typically wear scented products, you may need someone else to check whether or not the scent is gone.)

3. **Question: What do I do if I can't get the scent off or I can't go through the process because I didn't know in advance I would be taking care of a patient affected by chemicals/fragrance?**

Answer: One option is to come to work a little early and take a shower and rinse your hair, refraining from using any scented soap, hair products or lotions. Afterward, you can wear scrubs provided by the hospital or clinic that are triple washed in unscented soap and wear a hair bonnet (or two if necessary) while attending to the patient. Make sure the hospital-provided scrubs are not scented (sometimes housekeeping accidentally sends to the MCS cart); a patient or caregiver may be able to help you determine this.

4. **Question: Why can't I just put on gown/bonnet/and mask at work when caring for an MCS patient instead of going through all of the above steps?**

Answer: If you are only occasionally in the room of an affected patient, that might be fine unless you are heavily scented. Short exposures to mild scent reduced by wearing the garb may minimize MCS symptoms, especially if the MCS patient also wears a face mask, if they have one (many patients don't). Be sure that the PPE covers your scrubs and hair as much as possible.

Unlike the usual purpose of PPEs, the goal is to protect the patient from your scent, not you from patient-borne pathogens.

However, for staff who care for affected patients for long periods of time (e.g., during procedures, intensive care, dialysis, blood transfusions, and such), just wearing the PPE garb usually isn't effective if your body or your clothes are "offgassing" strong scents.

Question: Why can't the patient just wear a face mask?

If the affected patient wears a face mask (even a heavy N95 mask), this protection will reduce but does not eliminate chemical exposure and, over time, adverse symptoms usually result. Also, if the affected patient is already short of breath, feverish, nauseated, or unconscious, wearing a face mask can be more difficult than usual or create an additional health risk for him or her (such as inhalation of vomit or increased difficulty breathing).

5. **Question:** What will happen if I hang my clothes that I have de-scented next to my other clothes with scent?

Answer: The freshly de-scented clothes will absorb the fragrance from the scented clothes. The chemicals used in laundry detergent bind with the fabric and persist in off-gassing a scent for a very long time. It is best if unscented clothing can be hung in a place with fresh air after laundering and put on at work so they don't pick up scent in the car.

6. **Question:** Will using a scented product in my washing machine or dryer to "clean it" put chemical fragrance in any clothes that are later laundered in those appliances?

Answer: Yes. Such products cling to the sides of the washing tub (or dryer) and linger in the water that sits in the washing machine between cycles, and then are absorbed into later loads of laundry. To remove such chemicals, run the washing machine with hot water and about ½ cup of 70% rubbing alcohol for several cycles and then allow to air dry. For dryers, spray a solution of diluted alcohol (about 1 part alcohol to 5 parts water) and allow it to dry naturally; or run the dryer on an "air only" cycle, *without any heat* which could cause a fire.) The best approach is to avoid using scented products that gum up your machine or any scented products to clean laundry appliances.

7. **Question:** How long does perfume, after shave, body spray, styling gels, etc. linger on the skin and in the hair, so that I continue to carry scent?

Answer: If you typically wear perfume and other scented products, it can take days or weeks for the scent to "offgas" from your hair, body, and personal belongings, depending on what active measures you take to speed up the process. Also, individuals who routinely apply products such as perfume or scented hair spray on a daily basis run the risk that they will forget

to skip their use on a day they are scheduled to work with an affected patient. This understandable oversight due to habit can create a staffing assignment issue once they arrive at work.

8. **Question: I can't smell any scent on my clothes or in my house or car. But some patients still say I have a noticeable scent. Why can't I smell it?**

Answer: The chemicals in fragrances are "neurotoxic": i.e., they damage or disable one's sense of smell, much like certain brain injuries can. People who have been exposed to many or strong fragrances over long periods of time often have olfactory overload and are no longer able to smell their own products. (This reduced sense of smell can lead to overuse of the products.) It typically takes several days to a week spent in an unscented environment before your sense of smell recovers and you are able to detect chemical fragrances again. One important thing to know is that our sense of smell serves as a warning system for us, plays a role in our sense of taste, and serves other important functions in our bodies that should be protected.

9. **Question: Will minimizing fragrance use in my home environment help me and my family even though we are not knowingly affected by chemical fragrances?**

Answer: There is increasing emerging literature showing that exposure to chemicals (whether they are in fragrance or in traditional pollutants) are causing a wide variety of medical diseases and conditions, especially in children and pets, because of their smaller body size and/or developmental stage. Increasing severe allergies, MCS, chronic sinusitis, frequent headaches, lung diseases, neurological problems, cancers and other serious health conditions can develop over time after having received prolonged low level but chronic exposures to chemical fragrances. So you or members of your family may be in the process of developing a sensitivity of which you are not yet aware. Or they may be one cause of problems that have already developed (such as chronic sinusitis or severe allergies). If you avoid products with fragrances, you are taking action to protect yourself and your loved ones as well as help affected patients when you go to work.

Question: I want to smell and look nice for my patients and fellow staff. How can I do this without using scented products?

It is possible to smell fresh and clean and to look attractive and avoid use of scented products, too. See attached information re: many products available on the market that are fragrance free and healthy for your use and how to obtain them. Most people (in studies) say that they dislike the smell of other people's fragrances, so no one will miss your scented products. But many people will appreciate that you are not wearing them!

Question: Most people don't complain about my fragrances. Does that mean that it doesn't bother them?

Not necessarily. Most people don't say anything to individuals wearing scented products, even when it makes them feel ill, for fear of offending the person, especially if she or he is a co-worker. But they may comment on it to others or try to avoid being around the person.

Question: I have looked at some fragrance free products, but some were more expensive than those I can buy at Costco. I have to be conscious about cost.

While some fragrance free products are more expensive, many are less. Baking soda or Borax for laundry, for example, is much less expensive than regular laundry detergent and de-scents while it cleans. White vinegar added to the rinse cycle is a natural, inexpensive fabric softener that can be purchased in large quantity bottles at Costco and other such retailers. Unscented dryer balls or "wooly balls" to soften clothes can be reused many times, last a long time and don't add the toxins and gummy residue of products like Downy. Many fragrance free products can be purchased on-line at lower cost.

Another approach is to buy fragrance free products that are made for children and are often less expensive. (Also, if the product is safe for children, it's probably safe for you and your patients!)

Question: I've tried buying products labeled as "unscented," but they still seemed scented to me. How do I know if the products are really scent-free?

Some product manufacturers engage in what is called "green-washing": i.e., they claim a product is "unscented" or "ecologically friendly," when really they are not. Generally speaking, if a product is labeled "fragrance free" or "free and clear of perfumes and dyes," they are safe for use. Check the label to make sure that the ingredients list does not include "perfume," "fragrance," or "parfum." Be aware that if a label claims it has ingredients like "citrus," "cinnamon," or "strawberry," these are not natural substances—they are synthetic materials manufactured to mimic real scents and are toxic.

Also, be aware that many products marketed as "eco-friendly" may be less harmful to the environment (such as not adding phosphates to rivers) but, if they have chemical fragrance in them, they are harmful to human health.

Question: Are there other sources of scent on my body or clothes that I might not be aware of?

Yes. If you use "air fresheners" (which are perfumed products used to cover up other scents) in your car or home, or burn scented candles, or use scented products to "clean" your laundry appliances, the chemicals in these products can become embedded in your clothes, skin and hair and be strong enough to be a health issue for others.

Question: I'm not proud of it, because of the well-known health risks, but I'm a smoker and don't want my co-workers or others to know. I use scents to cover up the smell of tobacco smoke in my clothes and personal belongings.

They probably already know. They smell your scented products along with the smell of the tobacco smoke. More importantly, from your own health standpoint, scented products have many of the same chemicals that make smoking so dangerous—they are just delivered via a different method. Some

health experts also suspect that the manufacturers of fragranced products put chemicals in them that are intentionally addictive, so their customers remain loyal to buying their products (a practice called “branding,” much like the tobacco industry did for decades before being caught at it.)

Question: I’m not comfortable being asked or expected by my employer or anyone else to change my personal hygiene products, especially the products I use to do my laundry for me and my family. Don’t I have the right to make my own choices in these matters?

Yes, absolutely—unless or until it interferes with the performance of your work responsibilities, the first of which is to “do no harm” to your patients. There are many other personal choices that are routinely restricted or forbidden in the health care workplace, including use of drugs or tobacco products, types of jewelry worn, length and style of hair, and length and naturalness of fingernails, etc. All of us must make some adjustments to our personal preferences in order to meet the requirements of our employment. Our first priority as health care professionals must always be our ability to provide appropriate patient care, not our personal appearance or scent.

The good news is that you don’t have to make a choice—you can have it both ways! You can smell fresh and clean, have attractive hairstyling, wear truly clean and fresh clothes, and not make yourself or others ill.

Thank you for doing all you can to minimize the use of fragrance in health care settings!

Advice for Minimizing Scent: Health Care Workers, Evonne Hedgepeth, Ph.D., Health Psychologist and Teri Granger, M.S, former respiratory therapist

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