

A Guide to MCS

for family and friends

Someone you know advises you that he has multiple chemical sensitivity or environmental illness. Chances are, the person is hesitant or even unable to talk about this affliction in a way that is helpful to your understanding of his situation and needs. As with any chronic, life-threatening illness, your friend has physical limitations and restrictions, and these urgently require your attention.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity is a real name of a real illness. Patients acquire MCS usually because of an intense single exposure to a chemical (or chemicals) or because of long-term, constant exposure which assaults the body until the immune system breaks down. There is no cure. The effects of MCS are idiosyncratic to each patient and may not follow any usual pattern. Sometimes a "spreading effect" phenomenon ensues - the initial chemical triggers a mutation of the biological reaction mechanism and the body proceeds to react to an ever-broadening range of substances - so that the MCS patient himself can no longer predict or identify the source of a reaction.

Your friend might appear to be perfectly healthy and functional - thus, you might interpret his requests of you to be exaggerated. Many MCS patients experience a time delay of reactive symptoms to an exposure. What you might perceive as a trivial exposure to perfume, tobacco smoke, paint, marking pen, carbonless copy paper, exhaust fumes, electrical fields, etc. can literally rob your MCS friend of days or weeks - if not his life! Sudden, obvious reactions can be fainting, seizures, mental confusion, stuttering, or vocal cord paralysis, but delayed onset reactions can include longer-term neurological impairment, respiratory malfunction, insomnia leading to psychotic episodes, etc. The very pharmacological antidotes prescribed by a doctor not familiar with the illness can lead to further immune deficiency and the ensuing continuing cycle of low physical function. Also, the weaker the body becomes, the more hypersensitive it becomes to further exposure. Because of this constant fluctuation in immune strength/weakness, an exposure can elicit no reaction one day and a severe reaction the next day.

Your friend needs your help! You do not need to keep a running inventory of products and chemicals he needs to avoid. Be assured that an MCS patient has that inventory constantly in mind. But when your MCS friend tells you what he cannot tolerate, please take him seriously! Do not think that by saying you are not wearing scented products that you can sneak them by. You are toying with someone's life. A substance is not dangerous for the MCS sufferer because it "smells bad". It is dangerous because it causes a debilitating biological reaction in his body - whether he can smell the substance or not. Relate this to the consequences of sneaking sugar to a diabetic or taking away the cane and dog from a blind person.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity is a disability recognized by the Social Security Administration. However, it is next to impossible in many states to prove one's disability and thus be eligible for benefits because the industry itself (medical doctors) rarely acknowledges the illness. Can you imagine having this illness inflicted upon you (most likely because of someone else's negligence), having your professional life ended, most likely being forced to live in poverty, and not even having the acceptance of the medical community - let alone its help to manage your physical problems? Your MCS friend has learned through experience to cope - mainly through avoidance of potential exposures. However, leaving home (if even home itself is safe) is like venturing into a mine field - every step could be the last. Please do not exacerbate the problem.

We all have the right to accept or reject any ideas, concepts, or beliefs. If you choose, as does the allopathic medical community, to question or ignore the existence of this illness, please do not make your MCS friend suffer because of your personal opinion. He is simply trying to stay alive.