

# SCENT SENSITIVITY IS A HEALTH & SAFETY CONCERN

## What is the risk?

Fragrances are complex mixtures of chemicals formulated to have a pleasant odour. But what you smell is a chemical. The chemicals are volatile and they disperse into the air quickly and linger for a long time. These chemicals change as they come in contact with other substances.

Increasingly, people with allergies, asthma and multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) report that certain odours, even in small amounts, are triggering serious health issues. The problem increases in indoor environments where air exchange is poor. Those who suffer from MCS may react to these chemicals to the point they are incapacitated or must forgo routine activities such as work to avoid exposure.

According to the National Academy of Sciences, 95% of the chemicals used in fragrances are synthetic compounds derived from petroleum. Approximately 80% of fragrance formulations are made up of three to five different synthetics, which can include derivatives such as benzene, aldehydes and many other known toxins and sensitizers. Many of these – such as methylene chloride, toluene, methyl ethyl ketone and benzyl chloride – are known to cause cancer, birth defects, central nervous system disorders and allergic reactions.



## SYMPTOMS

- headaches
- dizziness
- shortness of breath
- nausea
- skin irritation

## CAN WORSEN

- asthma
- emphysema
- bronchitis
- allergies

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms can worsen with repeated or prolonged exposure. The condition becomes chronic and symptoms are triggered by lower levels of exposure than previously tolerated. Symptoms improve or resolve when the hazards are removed. More serious negative reactions, involving multiple organ systems, can occur when exposed to multiple, unrelated chemicals or substances.

## What products trigger reactions?

Products that can trigger reactions include personal care items such as perfume, cologne, hair products, soaps, deodorants, lotions, makeup, detergents, candles, cleaning substances and air fresheners.

Environmental sensitivities occur when people become sensitive to substances in their every day environment at levels well below what most people consider acceptable. Reactions can be triggered by scented products but also by cleaning products, detergent, paint, petrochemicals, cigarette smoke, pesticides, pets, plants, fuels, electromagnetic radiation, molds, foods, etc.



## Deal with the risk

Dealing with scent sensitivity can be difficult because it is a personal issue. The employer, along with the Joint Health & Safety Committee and all workers in the workplace, must recognize this hazard is serious and work together to reduce or eliminate its impact. Workers' concerns should be dealt with openly and honestly. It should be reinforced that any accommodation or policy change implemented is a result of health concerns and not because someone dislikes a certain smell.

## Find out what's causing reactions

The goal is to eliminate the hazard. Every attempt should be made to identify the source of the problem through product research and review of the Material Safety Data Sheets, if available (fragrances are classed as a consumer product and therefore are not covered under WHMIS legislation). Fragrance manufacturers are not required to list each ingredient on the product label. This may make it difficult to pinpoint the specific chemicals and determine potential health effects.

Good indoor air quality should be maintained. These chemicals are inhaled and enter the bloodstream through the lungs where they are distributed to other organs including the brain and nervous system. If it is discovered that the source is a fragrance worn by a co-worker, that worker should be approached respectfully by the committee or employer and informed of the hazard.



## How can you protect yourself and others?

If you have severe allergies or sensitivities to fragrances and other chemicals, you should inform your employer and your workplace H&S Committee. Since reactions can vary from mild to severe, these conditions should be taken seriously by everyone. Many businesses now enforce a "scent free" policy as a precaution to protect workers from exposure and prevent the development of sensitization. In this case all workers should be informed of and clearly understand the policy.

Contact your Union Rep or the Local Union's H&S Department if you have concerns or questions.

### Applicable Regulations:

The Occupational Health & Safety Act states:

- Section 25, (2), h: "an employer shall take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances for the protection of a worker."
- Section 28, (2), b: "No worker shall use or operate any equipment, machine, device or thing or work in a manner that may endanger himself, herself or any other worker."

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