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Open your mind and change the world!

Support someone with multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS)

Over one million Canadians have been diagnosed with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), a recognized disability under the *Canadian Human Rights Act*.¹ The number of diagnosed cases has been increasing (Statistics Canada, 2015-2016), with up to 75% being women and close to 50% being seniors (Statistics Canada, 2016). Despite these facts, it is likely that many people have never heard about this medical condition.

MCS is a chronic condition, which is initiated or started following exposures to substances commonly used in our living spaces. These exposures can be from chemicals contained in products that are used in daily life, such as fragrances, personal care and cleaning products, renovation and construction materials, pesticides, solvents, and even biological contaminants such as mould.

Exposures that can initiate/start MCS can be one or more large exposures, or long term or chronic low-level exposures at home or at the workplace. This results in sensitization of the individual, causing exposure to the substance, to result in symptoms. Removal of these exposures from the environment of the individual, will result in the person being symptom-free. However, if this is not done, constant exposures can provoke an increased number of symptoms in many body systems and can also cause the individual to have stronger reactions/symptoms to lower doses of exposure, and to an increased number of unrelated chemicals.

A diagnosis of MCS, which is a disability, can be lifechanging, but with the help of friends, family, and community, individuals can live fulfilling and successful lives. This illness is extremely dependent on the actions of individuals around the affected person, as many of the triggers and exposures that people face come from others. In order to ensure their wellbeing, support, compassion, and accommodation from others can make all the difference.





A diagnosis of MCS can often be met with stigma. For this reason, it is important to listen to and support those struggling with MCS. When someone we know is diagnosed with MCS, it can lead us to realize that many of the products we are using are causing harm to the people in our lives. While it may be hard to hear, we can all take action to help support our community members with MCS, creating a suitable and safe space for all of the people in our lives. It may seem overwhelming to find and change out our old products in favor of fragrance free, least toxic products, especially when we have been using many of these products for years. Luckily, with the push towards environmentally friendly living expanding every day, the list of alternatives to these chemicalized products is ever expanding.

All of these promising developments not only ensure the safety and wellbeing of those with MCS but also help to reduce the chemical pollution. Swapping these products can help us to cultivate safe and chemical free spaces in our homes, workplaces, and communities.

Without these changes, individuals experiencing MCS face challenges while trying to continue being active members in the community. When facing exposures nearly every time they leave the house, even small changes by the people around them can help to reduce these difficulties and help individuals with MCS avoid isolation and maintain engagement in their community.

It is challenging to watch a loved one suffer due to chronic illness, but helping individuals to manage their health challenges by listening, prioritizing their needs, and using least toxic strategies can help everyone be healthy and live in a safer, accessible, and environmentally friendly world. The following are some tips on how to support someone with MCS:

Inside our homes, transitioning towards least toxic, fragrance-free products such as beauty products (moisturizers, make-up, deodorant, shampoos, soaps), detergents, fabric softeners, and cleaning supplies is an important step. Not only will this help to keep your space welcoming and safe for folks with MCS but it will also help protect unwanted chemicals from impacting your own health.



Outside our homes, maintaining an outdoor garden or yard can be fun and provide a relaxing and beautiful natural space to enjoy, but we must be sure to use only healthy products in these outdoor spaces. Pesticides and other harmful products can be unhealthy for our neighbors, our pets, ourselves and even leach into the water supplies to create ongoing ramifications beyond what we can see.

In the workplace, fragrance-free policies and policies for least-toxic choices for all applications (which include products used for personal use, cleaning, and renovation) can make a big difference between being able to function in the workplace, or not. Asking for accommodation can be challenging for those who are afflicted by MCS and it is critical to meet the process of these accommodation requests by following the guidelines in the policy for appropriate action. A few small changes can help us to build a safe workplace and strong relationships with our colleagues.

In the medical sphere, stigma and lack of education can lead to psychological treatments, exacerbating symptoms and leading to increased exposure to triggers which can be both physically and mentally draining for those experiencing MCS. This problem showcases the critical nature of educated, patient-centered care which can help people with MCS to advocate for accommodations and necessary support, and receive accessible and appropriate health care.

Without the support of one's personal and professional network, lifestyle changes can be extremely challenging for those facing a bombardment of exposures and symptoms. Without accommodation and accessibility, individuals with MCS can face a non-ending cycle of exposures resulting in disability that can also lead to stigmatization, poverty, homelessness, and, almost always, to isolation. While this certainly depicts a frightening picture, all of these challenges can be avoided through the continued compassion and understanding of friends, loved ones, colleagues, and neighbors. The question should not be whether or not they are believed, but if the community will support one of their own in order to ensure the best life for everyone.

For help in choosing healthy alternatives, visit our Eco Living Guide: www.EcoLivingGuide.ca



ⁱ Canadian Human Rights Commission. (2019). Environmental sensitivity and scent-free policies. Retrieved from: <https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/en/resources/publications/policy-environmental-sensitivities>