

Questions & Answers (Q&A)

1. What are fragrances?

Fragrances are mixtures of thousands of chemicals intended to produce a particular scent. A single perfume can contain between 50 to 300 ingredients, 95% of which are petroleum-based volatile organic compounds (VOCs). Many of these are known to be respiratory irritant/sensitizers. These chemicals volatilize into the air we breathe. 30% of Canadians react to these exposures and experience symptoms such as headache, nausea, cough or skin rash; up to 4% of Canadians may experience an asthma attack. Cardio-respiratory patients can be made critically ill by exposure to fragrances.

Many frequently used products contain fragrances that can be damaging to health. They include personal care products such as perfumes, cologne, shaving cream, aftershave lotions, deodorant, shampoo, conditioner, gel, mousse, hairsprays, hand and body soaps or lotions, makeup, and sunscreen. They also include laundry soaps, clothes softeners, air fresheners, scented candles, scented items for the car, incense, garbage bags, etc.

2. Is it common for people to develop symptoms when exposed to fragrance?

Approximately one-third of Canadians experience symptoms when they are exposed to perfumes, fragrances and other scented products. This includes people suffering from asthma and other respiratory disorders, migraine, allergies and multiple chemical sensitivities (MCS).

3. What symptoms can people experience when they are exposed to fragrance?

The most common symptoms associated with fragrance exposures are:

- Asthma symptoms such as wheezing, coughing and shortness of breath
- Grogginess/difficulty concentrating
- Runny, stuffy nose/sinus problems
- Migraine headaches
- Rash
- Watery eyes
- Fatigue
- Eczema

The same fragrance can cause different symptoms in different people. Also, symptoms can vary in severity, from mildly irritating to disabling. Constant exposure can lead to prolonged disability. Anaphylactic episodes have been reported with exposure to fragrance.



4. Why must a health care facility go fragrance-free?

Every hospital or health-care setting is committed to the health and well-being of patients, staff and visitors.

No patient goes to a hospital or health-care practitioner expecting to be made sicker. No health-care worker would deliberately do anything to harm patients, colleagues and potentially, themselves. But when health-care workers choose to apply products containing fragrance to their skin, hair, or clothing, they may in fact be doing just that.

As noted in the November 3, 2015 editorial of the Canadian Medical Association Journal (CMAJ) : “There are many practices that are acceptable outside hospitals – but not inside. One of these is the application of artificial scents to our bodies (...) There is little justification for continuing to tolerate artificial scents in our hospitals (...) Hospital environments free from artificial scents should become a uniform policy, promoting the safety of patients, staff and visitors alike.”

As stated by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in their scent-free policy: “Fragrance is not appropriate for a professional work environment, and the use of some products with fragrance may be detrimental to the health of workers with chemical sensitivities, allergies, asthma, and chronic headaches/migraines.”

Choosing to use only fragrance-free products, especially while at work, will improve the facility’s air quality, and in turn will benefit patients, staff and visitors.

5. How can I change to fragrance free?

Becoming scent-free or fragrance-free is a process. The first step is to change all your products (personal, laundry, etc.) for fragrance-free ones. If you have always used fragrances it will take many washes before your laundry becomes fragrance-free. Remember, if you use perfumes -especially strong perfume - the day before coming to work, there is a good chance that the fragrances in the products will persist into the next day. So, if you are going to an event a day before going to work, it’s a good choice to use something that will fade quickly, for instance, a pure (non petro-chemical based), light essential oil. Keeping your home fragrance free will improve air quality and support a healthy environment for your family.

6. Can people have a reaction to scented products? Is this even possible?

Yes! Over 1.1 million people have been diagnosed with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) by a health professional (Statistics Canada, 2020). People experiencing this condition react to multiple chemicals at very low doses, and fragrances are a major trigger for symptoms. Due to this disability they find it hard to access health care spaces and often stay away from hospitals even when they need help. It is reported that people with MCS who do get treatment have a very hard time with the chemicals present in a hospital.

In addition to this, it is well documented that asthma is on the increase, especially in young people. It is also well known that asthma and migraine headaches have multiple triggers including chemical exposures.

7. What is Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)?

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) are triggered by one large exposure or by smaller exposures over time. Once a person is sensitized, they react to extremely low levels of the incitant. More exposures lead to a spreading of sensitivities, and reactions get stronger. Reactions manifest with multiple symptoms which can affect all the systems of the body. This condition is recognized by the Canadian Human Rights Commission and other human rights organizations as a disability that, like any other disability, must be accommodated under the law. All federal government offices are obliged to become fragrance-free if someone with MCS requests a fragrance-free space as part of an accommodation for their disability.

Providing accommodation for this segment of our population will go a long way towards avoiding extreme exclusion and isolation, and preventing severe poverty.

To learn more: <https://aseq-ehaq.ca/en>

8. Are sensitivities the same as allergies?

An allergy is a condition in which exposure to a material prompts the body's immune system to react with mild to very severe symptoms, which can be life threatening. Symptoms can be relieved by taking an anti-histamine medication, or, in the case of severe reactions, adrenaline.

Sensitivities to things such as products containing fragrance can cause the same type and severity of symptoms as allergens. As, with allergens, it is best to avoid exposure. However, the difference with MCS is that it also involves oxidative stress, systemic inflammation, and more than one bodily system beyond the immune system, including (but not limited to): the nervous, respiratory, musculoskeletal, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal systems. Unlike allergies, there is no medication that has been proven to relieve symptoms, although patients often report symptoms are helped by drinking sodium bicarbonate in water.

9. Do I not have the right to use whatever product I choose?

People have the right to smoke, too. However, many indoor and outdoor spaces are now smoke-free in order to respect everyone's right to good air quality. Similarly, fragrances volatilize into the air and are breathed in by others who may react with MCS, asthma, allergies and other illnesses such as respiratory and heart disease. So, "in keeping with the 'balance of convenience' principle, people should make adjustments to avoid adversely affecting the health of a group of people, no matter how small, especially in cases involving the workplace and shared public places".

10. Nobody has complained about my perfume. Why should I change?

A person suffering from exposure to fragrances may keep quiet because they feel it is an intrusion to ask you to refrain from using fragrances. However, your perfume is intruding on their health and well-being. People with these conditions do not wear a sign around their necks saying that they are sensitive to fragrances – though some do wear masks – so you have no way of knowing how many people are affected by your perfume. But once one knows that these effects do occur, one has a civic obligation to accommodate those who react to fragrances, by not using them.

11. Will fragrance-free products cause poor hygiene and body odour?

So many people suffer from the effects of fragrances, that many manufacturers, including some leading ones, now produce fragrance-free products. People who are fragrance-free simply do not smell of perfume, and using fragrance-free products does not cause poor hygiene or body odour, as these products are very effective.

12. Where will I find these fragrance-free products?

Fragrance-free items are now available in a wide range of products ranging from personal to laundry to cleaning – and even to some renovation products, such as zero VOC paints. You can find these products online, at grocery stores, pharmacies and health food stores. Remember to read labels. The ingredient list should be short, with ingredients that you can verify. There should be no mention of scent, parfum/perfume or fragrance on the label.

13. What is the difference between fragrance-free, scent-free and unscented?

These are the terms generally used in industry. Even if a product is labelled ‘scent-free’ or ‘unscented’, it may contain chemicals that mask/hide the smell of the product. People react to the chemicals emanating from the product, whether they are used to create a scent or to mask/hide it. Using even more chemicals to hide the scents does not solve the problem. People who are sensitive to these chemicals will still have symptoms upon exposure. Remember, it is not the ‘smell’ they have a problem with – it is the chemicals contained in that smell that trigger symptoms.

It is important to always read labels. Even on an unscented, scent-free or fragrance-free product, avoid the product if parfum/perfume/fragrance are listed as ingredients.

14. What if I wear a light scent that remains within arm’s length of me? Will that be ok?

People who react to the chemicals in fragrances will react to ‘light’ ones too. A light scent can easily contain as many chemicals as one that smells very strong. These chemicals do not only form a ‘scent-circle’ around you. They are left behind in spaces such as elevators, washrooms, hallways, patients’ rooms, etc. They are also moved around with air currents and can drift into common airspaces where everyone is then forced to breathe them in. In addition, people stand close to each other in areas such as elevators, and patients are commonly transported within the hospital using elevators. An already fragile person could have serious symptoms from these exposures. This is why “no scents is good sense” (Marsh, 1998).

15. Is it also important to have fragrance-free, least toxic cleaning products in buildings?

Due to the number of people using fragrance-free and less toxic products, the industry has responded with environmentally friendly products for personal use, cleaning, maintenance and construction. It is important for the sake of human health and the environment that fragrance-free and least toxic strategies be adopted in health-care facilities.

16. Is there any scientific data to back up this information?

Yes. Please read the narrative literature review posted on the main page. Also see the list of hospitals across Canada that already have fragrance or scent-free policies.

17. Is it even possible to make a public building such as a hospital fragrance-free?

As the health effects of fragrances become known and enter public conversation, the idea of using products containing fragrances in a health care setting just does not make sense. Health care facilities are spaces where the most vulnerable among us, those who are ill, come to receive services and help to get better. Exposure to fragrances will, on the contrary make them worse if they are susceptible to these chemicals. A key to success is education and awareness. Then everyone can take responsibility for their personal choices.

It may not be completely possible to achieve a totally fragrance-free environment as some people who are not familiar with the policy may enter the hospital wearing fragrances. However, with time, education and awareness, these episodes will be less frequent.

Effective signage, phone voice mail messaging, pamphlets, etc., will create a momentum of awareness and change.

18. What can a health care facility do to ensure that patients and visitors do not wear fragrances to the hospital?

The following actions will help inform patients and visitors about the policy:

- Telephone voice mail messages informing patients and visitors that they should not use perfumes, colognes and personal care products containing fragrances when visiting the hospital.

- Advising patients about the policy and if required, guiding them to the website of the facility for alternatives to products containing fragrances.

- Providing visible signage and readily available pamphlets about the fragrance-free policy.

Adapted from a document '*Fragrance Free Implementation Kit for Health Care Facilities*' by greenhealthcare.ca