

# Multiple Chemical Sensitivities

OFFICIAL

## Acknowledgement

This factsheet acknowledges that Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) causes suffering and disability within Victorian communities and provides high level information regarding the condition.

Safer Care Victoria (SCV) would like to acknowledge our appreciation of the organisations and individuals who continue to raise awareness of the needs of people experiencing MCS and for their commitment to extending the MCS knowledge base.

We encourage the development of local policies/guidance to help health service administrators and health professionals to best respond to the needs of people with MCS. This will enable access to effective, quality care and improved patient health outcomes.

## What is MCS?

MCS is a condition where people become very sensitive to certain chemicals that are commonly found in things like perfumes, cleaning products, and pesticides. It is also referred to as idiopathic environmental intolerance (IEI).

When people with MCS are exposed to certain chemicals, they experience varying non-specific physical and psychological symptoms. Each person with MCS may have different reactions, and even small amounts of chemicals can cause them to experience symptoms.

The exact cause of MCS is not fully understood. It can be challenging to diagnose and manage as there may not be a clear cause or reason.

## MCS triggers

Some chemicals that trigger MCS symptoms are known to be irritants or to be potentially toxic to the nervous system. Various other products and chemicals that cause problems may include:

- anaesthetics
- artificial colours, flavours and preservatives in food, drinks, and certain medications
- perfumes and fragrances
- detergents and other cleaners
- smoke from tobacco products
- solvents used in different products e.g. paint, felt pens, etc.

## Most common symptoms

- Nasal congestion, itching and sneezing
- Respiratory and flu-like symptoms
- Skin rashes
- Muscle and joint pain
- Headache/migraines
- Fatigue
- Dizziness
- Chest pain and breathing problems
- Changes in heart rhythm
- Nausea
- Bloating, gas and diarrhoea
- Mental confusion and trouble concentrating
- Short term memory loss
- Mood changes, irritability, anxiety, and depression

## What causes chemical sensitivities?

Most people with MCS can trace their symptoms back to an instance when they had a major acute chemical exposure or chronic low-level chemical exposure over a period of time.

Individuals can be genetically susceptible to developing this sensitivity. People with allergies such as hay fever or asthma are more likely to be sensitive to chemicals.

## Caring for MCS

### Prevention

People with MCS often need to make changes to their living and working environments to avoid exposure to the chemicals that trigger their symptoms. MCS can be worsened by continued exposure to toxic chemicals.

### Treatment

There is currently no specific treatment for MCS. When possible, the substances causing the symptoms, should be removed or exposure limited.

Depending on the sensitivity and severity, there are some potential strategies that may help:

- changing to more natural, non-toxic personal care and cleaning products, clothing and bedding material
- removing specific toxic products from homes
- use of non-toxic or less toxic building materials when building or renovating the home
- choosing organic foods for consumption
- using air purifier and water filters.

It is advisable for individuals with MCS to work closely with their healthcare professionals to develop personalised strategies for symptom management and to explore potential treatments that may help alleviate their symptoms.

## What to expect?

Individuals with MCS may find that sensitivity can be reduced over time by removing or limiting chemical exposure, ensuring rest and good nutrition, and exercising when physically able. Social support can also help reduce sensitivity and individuals may be able to lead life with minimal to no symptoms.

It is important to note that people may have become sick over a period of months or years, so the sensitivity may take many years to overcome. For others, MCS may persist and require ongoing living and working environment adjustments.

## Want to know more?

Contact your local health service or hospital for their local MCS policies/guidance and advice that consider each patient's condition, care requirements and local environmental factors.

Reference to the previous Victorian Guide for MCS is available in the [Multiple Chemical Sensitivity - Guide for Hospitals 2010](#).

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