

What CILs Need to Know About People With **Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and Electrical Sensitivity**

What are Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) and Electrical Sensitivity (ES)? People with MCS, also called environmental illness or chemical hypersensitivity, develop disabling reactions to chemicals and other stimuli. These include pesticides, scented personal care products, preservatives/ adhesives in construction materials and furnishings, cleaning products, gasoline and diesel fuel and exhaust, tobacco and wood smoke, paint and solvents, oil and gas heating systems, emissions from office equipment, mildew and mold, foods, and medications. Reactions may be immediate or delayed. Approximately 11 million people in the U.S. live with MCS. With ES, individuals have reactions to electro-magnetic fields (EMFs) given off by wiring, electrical equipment, transformers, and fluorescent lighting. Approximately 8 million Americans experience electrical sensitivities. Both MCS and ES are chronic and systemic.

How Do MCS or ES Affect People Who Experience It? Reactions to chemicals vary among individuals and from exposure to exposure. Symptoms include difficult breathing, asthma and reactive airway disease, physical collapse, paralysis, seizures, memory loss and other cognitive impairments, emotional and perceptual distortion, digestive problems, headache, nausea, vertigo, fatigue, muscle and joint pain, gait and speech impairment, numbness and tingling, chest pain, and even death. For people with ES, symptoms are loss of muscle control, noise sensitivity, and other neurological problems.

What Accommodations Do People With MCS or ES Need? The most important accommodation is avoidance of triggering chemicals, other problematic stimuli, and/or EMFs. This could mean staying in the home or within a “safe” room in the home, and accessing services via telephone or mail. Visitors may need to eliminate chemicals (such as scented personal products) from their body or clothing, for example, when providing in-home services. It is critical to take these requests seriously since someone who is homebound is already dangerously ill. Others with MCS may participate in a range of activities with accommodations such as work or meeting space with a window that opens, fragrance/smoke-free policies, air purifiers, incandescent or natural lighting, outside venting of copiers/fax machines, natural pest management, flexible work hours or telecommuting, and advance notice when chemical use is absolutely necessary. Signage, asking those who enter the premises not to wear scented personal products, should be used. It is important to know that avoidance and accommodations are not a cure for MCS or ES. Input from affected individuals should guide accommodation policies and procedures. The Job Accommodation Network lists further examples at <http://www.jan.wvu.edu/media>

What Are Important Advocacy Issues for People with MCS/ES?

Housing: Safe housing challenges this population. While the IL movement advocates total integration of people with disabilities into mainstream housing, people with MCS/ES may need segregated housing because of the issues they face. Currently only one complex in the U.S. has been designed to accommodate people with MCS, constructed with safer materials and managed to safeguard residents from toxins. People with MCS/ES need non-toxic apartments or houses, as well as neighborhoods that accommodate them. Lawn and farm fertilizers, pesticides, barbecuing, fireplaces, and industrial emissions, as well as power lines, transformers, and power

stations all contribute to the environment of “inaccessible” housing. CILs can help by promoting safer building materials in all public housing, and by advocating for housing designed for people with MCS/ES.

Adoption of Cleaner Air Symbol: A new movement advocates adoption of the “Cleaner Air” symbol, used much like the “handicapped access” symbol to alert visitors to places in which certain conditions have been met. Although no universal definition of “cleaner air” exists nor are accessibility guidelines yet finalized, this symbol at least indicates that there is a “safer” path of travel where chemicals, toxic construction materials and fluorescent lighting are not used (or can be easily turned off), and the air is well ventilated. Disability rights activists are encouraged to advocate for adoption of this symbol with their state policymakers. For more info: <http://users.lmi.net/~wilworks/ehnlrx/pclnair.html>.

Where Can I Find More Information About MCS and ES?

HEAL of Southern Arizona [<http://www.healsoaz.org>] gives guidance on preventing, coping with, and accommodating MCS, including information about safe products.

Multiple Chemical Sensitivity: A Survival Guide. Pamela Reed Gibson, Ph.D. New Harbinger Publications, Inc. 2000. Oakland, CA.

Human Ecology Action League (HEAL), P.O. Box 29629, Atlanta, GA 30359. (404) 248-1898. e-mail: HEALNatnl@aol.com. Organization provides materials and information, and a newsletter, *The Human Ecologist*.

National Center for Environmental Health Strategies (NCEHS), 1100 Rural Ave., Voorhees, NJ 08043. (856) 429-5358. Source for education, research, support, and advocacy.

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