

Multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I think my mother has Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, if such a thing exists. It started when she got a bad allergic reaction to a certain brand of carbonless copies at work, but has since ballooned into an allergic reaction to just about everything imaginable.

I am really confused as to whether she has a real disease or not. Sometimes she has spent the last two years doing almost nothing but seeing doctors, fighting with Workman's Comp to continue paying for her 'disability,' etc.

Alice, your answers have always been straight to the point, and I need a straight answer now. Does Multiple Chemical Sensitivity really exist? Is it all just mental?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's no wonder you're confused by multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) — even medical professionals and researchers have struggled to definitively verify the existence of the condition! Individuals experiencing what is referred to as MCS report symptoms, such as dizziness, headaches, and even problems breathing, to specific substances. The straight answer — that MCS isn't considered a medical condition nor a chemical based illness by the American Medical Association and World Health Organization — comes with the caveat that the symptoms people experience are indeed very real and can lead to increased contact with medical professionals and interference in daily functioning, as in your mother's case. MCS is the most common term, but it's sometimes referred to by other names, such as environmental illness, toxicant induced loss of tolerance, and the petrochemical problem. Even though MCS itself isn't a diagnosable disease, the symptoms your mother reports are absolutely worthy of your concern.

MCS is a highly disputed and medically unexplained chronic experience that include general symptoms such as dizziness, fatigue, headaches, and nausea, and sometimes more severe symptoms such as seizures, skin irritation, and problems breathing, among others. While the symptoms are more commonly agreed upon, the debate is largely around the possible causes. Some medical professionals believe these symptoms may be the result of exposure to various

natural and synthetic chemical substances, the most common being cleaning products, cigarette smoke, gas and paint fumes, and perfumes. Chemicals elicit a variety of responses depending on the individual; they make some feel sick, exacerbate medical conditions such as asthma in others, and can act in a similar manner to contaminants that cause allergies. While many people respond to environmental triggers and may feel ill as a result, people with MCS report feeling these effects at a much lower level of exposure.

You asked whether or not it's just mental; this in fact, is something that is currently debated in the medical community. Some believe that the symptoms experienced by those with MCS are actually physically manifesting psychiatric conditions such as anxiety. As a result, these symptoms may simply be a secondary condition. On the other hand, others believe that MCS is the primary condition itself and is the response to certain chemicals. For many that experience MCS, studies indicate that there are some other common co-occurring conditions. In one recent study, over 70 percent of those who were told they had MCS by a health care providers also had a diagnosis of asthma or a similar asthma-like condition. Over 86 percent report having problems when exposed to products with fragrances. The prevalence of MCS is increasing, and many find that they lose time at work or in other public places due to the scents that trigger adverse effects.

It sounds like your mother has seen a number of health care professionals. Has she considered visiting an allergist? This may help narrow down the chemicals to which her body reacts. If they are able to identify any of these chemicals, they may be able to provide insights on how the symptoms associated with exposure can be managed. Speaking to a mental health professional may also be beneficial — dealing with a long-term (and complicated) health condition can be emotionally challenging and strenuous. It's also good to check in to make sure you're doing okay. Watching a parent suffer can certainly be difficult. You may find it helpful to talk this out with a trained professional, too. Here's hoping for health and happiness for you and your mother.

Alice!

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