



Sense about scents

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The very word ‘fragrance’ brings to mind gentle wafts of perfumed airs, perhaps

even a little bit of romance... certainly a pleasurable response. Few of us think of the reality that is ‘fragrance’. There can be up to 500 chemicals in one perfume. Better yet, up to 95% of those are petroleum-based. That soft, floral essence may not be quite as natural as it smells.

Scents are all around us. They are in the perfumes and colognes we just gave (or received) as Valentine’s Day gifts. They are in laundry and cleaning products, personal care products, air fresheners, scented candles and even garbage bags. They are everywhere.

Fragrance chemicals are organic compounds that vaporize into the air (which is why we can smell them). They are often added to products to create a scent, or to mask the odour of other ingredients. Among the chemicals found in scented products are toluene, ethanol, acetone, formaldehyde, benzene derivatives, ethylene chloride, and many others known to cause cancer, birth defects, infertility and problems with the nervous system.

But it smells so nice!

Perhaps. Or not. There are a range of reactions to the chemicals in fragrances. Certainly, anyone with breathing problems like asthma will find them difficult, but the effects are wide ranging. Some of the health effects of scented products include watery or dry eyes, double vision, sneezing and nasal congestion, ear pain, dizziness, rashes, headaches, fatigue, nausea, and muscle and joint pain. But it smells so nice....

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Faced with so many scents — okay, chemicals — in the air, the body may eventually rebel. Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) is an acquired illness characterized by severe reaction to chemical exposures that most of us tolerate readily. It can be triggered by volatile organic compounds (VOCs) like those in paint, cleaning products, gasoline, and even some perfumes. An MCS reaction can range from simple sinus congestion and watery eyes to migraines and other debilitating reactions.

Okay then, it may smell nice and be bad, but what can I do about it? You are already doing something by becoming better informed. Try to avoid using scented products, switching to scent-free alternatives. If you do use scented products, then use them sparingly. A general rule to consider: it should not be detectable more than an arm’s length away. Avoid applying the product in a public area, and don’t use air fresheners

in your work area. It is probably a good idea to air out your drycleaning before wearing it, too.

Having made the decision to reduce your

‘fragrance footprint’, you should probably know the meaning of ‘fragrance-free’ and ‘unscented’. Unfortunately, these terms are used with virtually no restrictions. They could mean that the product has less scent than the scented version of the same product from that manufacturer. And the label offers no guarantee that it won’t trigger a reaction. Sometimes, there are chemicals to neutralize the real scent, making it seem scent-free. Still, choosing products with these labels is still safer than choosing the scented versions.