

Accommodation for Environmentally Sensitive Workers:

For workers diagnosed with Environmental Illness, Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and other conditions such as asthma or migraine, known to be triggered by environmental chemicals.

Preamble:

Accommodation is a process and not all recommendations and modifications are successful. When a change has not achieved the result anticipated, it should not be considered a failure, but instead as a worthwhile experience which will help to shape further change and accommodation that will result in either continuing at work or a successful return to work.

All parties need to understand that for accommodation to be successful both the employer and the employee need to work together. The employer needs to make changes to improve the environment as much as possible and the employee needs to make changes to optimize self-management of their disability.

Each person seeking accommodation is unique and this needs to be recognized. One size does not fit all. One feature which all environmentally sensitive people have in common is their state of heightened sensitivity within the nervous system. Symptoms are triggered by common environmental contaminants which the majority of the population can tolerate without discomfort.

Principle recommendations:

1. Reduced Scent Environment

- a) At the present time it is impossible to maintain a completely scent free environment, however a **scent-free policy** is an effective way of limiting scent use and ameliorating the suffering of those who are environmentally sensitive.
- b) Employers should be prepared to educate staff on what it means to have a **Reduced Scent Environment** and how compliance will be monitored.
- c) Employees and all staff are asked to use only fragrance free personal care products and cosmetics. These are now readily available in most stores and should not represent a hardship in terms of cost or availability.

2. Responsibility for creating and maintaining a modified (Reduced Scent) bwork environment:

- a) It is the responsibility of the environmentally sensitive to inform their employer or those in charge, of their condition and ensure that appropriate medical information is provided.
- b) Supervisory staff (managers), owners and/or occupational health and safety personnel should ensure that the modified, **Reduced Scent Environment** is maintained and that all coworkers are compliant with the **Scent-Free Policy**.

- c) Workers themselves should not be expected to enforce a scent free policy as this often leads to interpersonal conflict which aggravates the medical condition and is likely to increase sensitivity.

3. In the Event of Reaction: (Medical emergency)

People who are sensitive to the environment may react in various ways.

- a) For example an individual with asthma has an asthma attack triggered. The person should remove themselves from the environment to a place where the air is cleaner and free of obvious contaminants (this may include well meaning workers or attendants who are unaware that they are scented and their presence perpetuates the problem). The person who is ill will usually self administer medication and will know what to do.
- b) If the reaction is severe and not responsive to the usual medications, the person reacting will need medical help immediately – call 911. Such a reaction may appear like a severe asthma attack or even an anaphylactic episode with obvious swelling, redness, difficulty in breathing and shock.
- c) Some people will look unwell, appear confused and have great difficulty in looking after themselves. They should be helped to clean air and will need time to recover.
- d) When individuals are reacting to the environment they may become hypersensitive to triggers other than scent. For example, bright lights, fast moving objects and loud sounds may also be amplified for the individual. Having a dedicated room for workers to reduce overall stress is recommended and is beneficial for the whole staff.
- e) It may be difficult to detect any outward change of illness or distress in some people. When someone known to be environmentally sensitive reports difficulties and that they are experiencing symptoms, it should be acknowledged. They will need to go to a clean and quiet place for a time to recover.

For a worker who is disabled by Multiple Chemical Sensitivity recovery may require leaving the workplace. The length of time to recover varies and for some people takes a few days. The person who is environmentally sensitive is the best judge of this.

4. Ventilation and Indoor Air Quality Issues:

- a) Ensure that ventilation is adequate and working efficiently. Ensure that the system has been well maintained.
- b) Maintain a work environment which is free of pollutants such as fragrances, strong chemical cleaning agents, pesticides, exhaust fumes, tobacco smoke, etc.
- c) Provide adequate exhaust systems to remove fumes from copiers and similar office machines.
- d) Copiers and printers should be located away from the work areas of environmentally sensitive people.
- e) Make certain the ventilation system is not distributing pollutants throughout the work-site from locations within or outside of the building (for example from a smoke stack, idling vehicle exhaust etc).
- f) If possible a separate office for the sensitive worker allows control of the area. There should be no through traffic nor should the office be close to a meeting or

gathering area. For some an office or workspace that has working windows is very helpful.

g) An air purification system is helpful. If possible this should be for the whole building. If this is not possible a free standing Air Cleaner, with an activated carbon and HEPA filter, close to or in the personal workstations should be provided.

h) When environmental stress (contamination) in the building is apparent, air quality testing for dust, particulates, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, mould and VOC concentration should be completed by an industrial hygiene professional.

5. Construction, Remodeling and Cleaning Issues:

- a) Provide pre-notification of events such as remodeling, painting, pesticide applications, floor waxing, and carpet shampooing by way of signs, memos, e-mail or an employee register. A voluntary registry can be created for people to be notified on a regular basis.
- b) Allow for alternative work arrangements for those people who may be sensitive to the chemical agents used in the above activities such as offering the use of another office, work on another floor of the building, work outside, or work from home.
- c) Use non-toxic building materials, furnishing, and supplies.
- d) Use inert floor coverings such as tile or wood.
- e) If industrial products are being used such as solvents, primers, stains, paints, lubricants, etc., consider any alternative products (e.g. VOC free paint) that could possibly be used that may not illicit an MCS/EI reaction . Such products should have fewer toxic components and lower volatility. It is important to recognize that a product labelled as "Green" may not be suitable for all environmentally sensitive persons.
- f) If possible, have cleaning, maintenance, and remodeling activities performed when the building is not occupied to reduce employee exposure to these activities.
- g) Discontinue the use of toxic pesticides and opt for an alternative pest management program.
- h) Discontinue the use of synthetic lawn care products outside the building.
- i) Do not allow smokers to congregate close to entrances to the building.
- j) Use signage which is easily seen and can be easily read to inform all entering the building that there is a policy in place to limit the use of scented products by those within the building.

Individual workplace accommodation recommendations:

Further, individualized recommendations depend upon many factors such as the specific health problems, the level of disability, the nature of the work and types of environmental exposure which occur within the workplace.

The recommendations need to come from a physician and/or health care team that is familiar with these issues and has expertise in the management of multiple chemical sensitivity.