

How to Be Fragrance Free

A guide for anyone preparing to attend a fragrance-free space.

Chemically sensitive people vary in their reactions to scents and chemicals, smoke and pet dander. When attending a fragrance-free event or visiting a chemically sensitive person, the more thoroughly you can rid yourself of scents, smoke, pet hair, and chemicals, the better. Begin preparation as far in advance as possible. To be truly scent free, you should eliminate all of your scented products, including those containing scented essential oils.

What is fragrance-free?

Fragrance-free products are free of artificial and natural scents, including essential oils. Products labeled "natural" are not necessarily safe to use around people with severe chemical sensitivities. Products labeled "unscented" are sometimes okay, but sometimes contain heavy chemical masking agents designed to cover up a scent. It is best to only use natural products from a health food store specifically labeled "unscented," "free of perfumes and dyes," or "fragrance free."

Making your clothing fragrance-free

If you have previously washed your clothing in scented detergent or fabric softener, or if it has been exposed to perfumes or is new, it will take numerous washings to make it "fragrance-free" (if you plan to be around someone with severe chemical sensitivities, this can mean 20–30 washings or more for clothes with detergent residue, or a dozen or more washings for new clothes). Adding baking soda and fragrance-free detergent to your wash will help get rid of some of the fragrance. Soaking the clothes overnight in baking soda and water, or oxygen-based scent-free laundry boosters, will also help.

The hardest scents to remove are usually perfume — if you were wearing it with that item of clothing — and fabric softener. Try not to wear clothing that has been exposed to either of these items. The best thing to do is to simply switch to a fragrance-free brand of detergent. If you do not have any fragrance-free detergent, soak and wash a set of clothes in baking soda and water and wear those.

If you hugged a person with perfume, pumped gasoline, just came from a room full of people wearing scented products, or exposed yourself to smoke (cigarette, wood smoke, pot smoke) or incense (or burning essential oils, candles, air fresheners), it will still be on your clothes and you might need to shower and change again.

Making your body fragrance-free

Use fragrance-free soap, lotion, shampoo, conditioner, lip balm, sunscreen, shaving cream, and hairspray. Do not wear cologne, perfume, or insect repellent. Make this change well in advance. If you tend to use a lot of scented products on a regular basis, the fragrance residue will stay on your skin and hair even after many washings.

Do not wear make-up unless it is all natural and fragrance-free. If you have been around people wearing scents, left a store with chemically treated or scented products, or been in a closed-air space such as an airplane, try to shower again.

You can use baking soda as a substitute for shampoo, soap, and deodorant (patted under the arms). You can also use Dr. Bronner's unscented soap for your soap, shampoo, and clothing wash. For hair gel, try using gelatin dissolved in warm water, then refrigerated. Olive oil and beeswax, melted together, make a thicker, pomade-like gel. Autumn Harp's Un-Petroleum Jelly is a good alternative for thicker gel.

Making a space fragrance-free

Substitute nontoxic alternatives for cleaning products, building materials, and pesticides in your home or professional space. People with chemical sensitivities (not to mention those with allergies and asthma) are very restricted as to where they can go.

Imagine the days before cigarette smoke was banned in certain places, when asthmatics basically risked life-threatening situations in every public place. For many people with chemical sensitivities, who sometimes go into anaphylaxis or have seizures during exposures, these life-threatening situations are almost everywhere, including in the very hospitals where they might go to get treated. Many people simply end up homeless or living in tents due to the lack of available "safe space."

What can you do? Use water and baking soda, cleaner-free antimicrobial cleaning cloths, or water-only steam-cleaners to clean. Don't keep pets or sell scented products

at your place of business (or, if you choose to sell scented products, keep them separate from other items and in a closed metal or glass case). Consider installing a metal-construction air-purifier in your space. Post a sign if you have done recent renovations or sprayed pesticides.

Why should I be fragrance free?

Wearing scented products causes harm to others, and limits disability access for people with chemical sensitivities. If you are able-bodied, you might be doing a very disabled person a great favor by being fragrance free. If you are disabled, you will help to create a more unified and inclusive disability movement. You will benefit the environment. You will put economic pressure on companies that still don't have to regulate toxic topical chemicals the way ingested chemicals are regulated. You will release people with MCS from chemical exile.

What if I cheat just a little?

Sometimes, for the chemically sensitive, a little compliance can be worse than none at all, so be as thorough as you can. Think of the analogy of natural gas used in homes. An odor was added to the gas so that people would be able to detect and avoid its dangerous and possibly deadly effects, and call for help. Sometimes, ironically, people wearing heavy scents are easier for the chemically sensitive to avoid.

You might think to yourself that you are helping a chemically sensitive person by changing to one or two fragrance-free products, but this isn't always true, unless you refrain from all scented products before seeing the person. However, please don't use this logic to ignore the process altogether; you're still benefiting everyone's health by being fragrance-free, as many fragrances contain neurotoxic and carcinogenic ingredients.

But I have seen chemically sensitive people at non-fragrance-free events, and they looked just fine

Chances are, if you saw a chemically sensitive person at such an event, he or she was stretching to be there and planning for a big payback over the next week or month. Unlike regular allergies, which might cause instant congestion or sneezing, chemical sensitivity reactions might take longer, and might last for days, weeks, months, or years afterwards.

Exposures to fragrance chemicals can cause brain and organ damage for chemically sensitive people, and can be life-threatening. You might see a chemically sensitive person at an event, but you might not see that same person in bed for days afterward with cognitive problems, flu-like symptoms, headaches, etc. Even if that person is wearing a filter mask or toting oxygen, he or she will probably get sick from the event if it isn't fragrance-free.

What types of things make chemically sensitive people sick?

The list is so long that it's best to abide by the restrictions above, and ask individuals what else they might react to. Ultimately, some chemically sensitive people, particularly those who can't limit their exposures, become "universal reactors," and react to almost everything in modern life. Some common triggers are fragrances, pesticides, cleaning products, plastics, essential oils, car exhaust, gasoline, new clothes and furniture, carpeting, copy toner, smoke, dander, ink-printed items such as books and newsprint, and building materials.

This guide was written by **Peggy Munson**, a writer and disability activist living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS). It is shared here by East Bay Meditation Center in support of our fragrance-free policy and our commitment to disability justice and universal access.

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