

CHEMICAL BURDEN

When Elizabeth shops, she hurries through the aisles, avoiding people whose scent carries even the faintest traces of artificial soaps, deodorants, detergents or perfumes.

Should she meet someone and want to touch them, she asks if they're safe. Sometimes, though, she wants a little normal human contact. Then she shakes their hand or gives them a hug or stands too close. If they are safe, so is Elizabeth; if not, she scrambles to wash. If the scent clings, her lungs begin to burn, she grows weak, and her cognitive functions slow, all of which can last for hours or days. Elizabeth plans her days around the number of exposures she can handle.

Once, she didn't know how to adapt. She didn't understand that she was developing an extreme form of multiple chemical sensitivity, a condition also known, with poetic insight, as Twentieth Century Syndrome. Modern life takes place amid the fine-print ingredients on a tube of toothpaste or pack of chips, writ large and endlessly, with the synthetic more common than the natural. And while these chemicals are tested individually for acute toxicity, long-term and synergistic effects are largely unmeasured.

Studies suggest that millions of people are chemically sensitive, and that number may be growing, though firm estimates are hard to find. Severity ranges from mildly inconvenient to fully incapacitating. Further complicating matters, cases vary considerably – although lung irritation and petrochemical sensitivities are particularly common – because different people are sensitive to different things.

The biological mechanisms of MCS are unknown. People may accumulate chemicals over time, in doses large and small, until their metabolisms are saturated, even altered, and cannot handle what they once tolerated and others still do. The stresses of our collective mental environment may also play a role, and the roots of the ailment likely exist at the nexus of mind, body and environment – a place where medicine is reluctant to go.

Many of us can appreciate being worried about the chemicals we constantly eat and breathe and touch. But imagine if substances as common as soap, ink or plastic left you gasping with pain and hardly able to think. And what, moreover, if nobody understood you?

“You're trying to be part of society at the same time as you've been exiled by it. I felt like I was taken off my own planet and put on a new one,” Elizabeth recalls. “I didn't know what was happening. Our society normalizes symptoms and blindly accepts chemicals that are unsafe.”

Elizabeth's early symptoms arose in high school and intensified as she grew older, but nobody told her what was happening. Doctors gave her antibiotics and allergy medications, none of which worked.

“Society didn't honor what my body was saying,” she says.

“The only question I needed to ask was,

‘What am I exposed to on a daily basis?’”

Slowly Elizabeth noticed that she was especially sensitive to certain chemicals, among them diesel fumes, artificial scents and ink. She adapted as best she could, sometimes wearing a portable air purifier, but five months after being sprayed with pesticides used to control West Nile virus, she crashed. Abdomen swollen, ovulation disrupted, vision narrowed, lungs malfunctioning and overwhelmed by fatigue, Elizabeth could no longer live a normal life.

She moved to a simple home in the country and surrounds herself with the Post-It notes she needs to remember things. Helped by modest disability payments and a sympathetic local culture, she struggles to keep exposures to a tolerable minimum.

“All I had to do was get away from the chemicals, but I didn't know what was happening. I wish somebody had told me. But would I have listened?” she wonders. “I didn't get it until I lost everything, until I couldn't deny or justify or rationalize it, until I could no longer fit society's belief system into reality.”

Brandon Keim

Elizabeth suffers from a condition known, with poetic insight, as Twentieth Century Syndrome.