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Living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity during the Covid-19 pandemic: a patient's perspective

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Patient's viewpoint

'One positive outcome for sufferers of multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) during the Covid-19 pandemic, is the fact that face masks can be worn without getting stares and rude comments from the general public. As the condition is not well known, prior to the pandemic wearing a mask in public was a cause of great anxiety for myself, and I am sure for many other sufferers too. Therefore, previously I would not use my mask when in public. Now it is the opposite way, if you are not wearing a mask you receive stares and comments.

One downside to the pandemic, and there are many, is the use of all the chemicals, such as hand sanitisers and the variety of chemicals used to clean and sterilise everywhere we go, for example, in shops, banks, restaurants, cafes and hospitals. It is very embarrassing when every time you enter a shop or a bank, for example, you are asked to use the hand sanitiser and you have to explain that you are chemical sensitive and cannot use it. Being sensitive to all the chemicals being used at the moment does present problems as it causes more symptoms more often than would normally occur.

I develop nosebleeds when in contact with various disinfectants, bleaches and hand sanitisers. The taste in my mouth is of the chemicals being used, and as the chemicals are everywhere, the taste can remain in the mouth for a very long time. As a result, food has no taste as all I can taste is whatever disinfectant I have been in contact with. If these chemicals come into contact with metal, then the

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taste in my mouth is of a metallic nature, which makes me feel sick. I have stomach upsets due to the amount of chemicals being used. Bleaches and disinfectants also cause a burning and tingling sensation on the skin, and worse still, a burning and tingling sensation all the way down the digestive tract. This can lead to bad headaches and a sore throat. These symptoms have a knock-on effect to the anxiety and depression caused by MCS.

Mental health related to MCS has been made worse by the pandemic due to the amount of chemicals being used. Many sufferers are not going out, and therefore their mental health suffers too. Personally, although not pleasant I do try to go out at least once a day and face my fears. My anxiety has been worse due to the pandemic, and my medication has been doubled to help me cope. Depression, is another symptom made worse by the Covid-19 lockdown. Not being able to go anywhere, without coming into contact with chemicals, and worrying about this before even leaving the home. My worries include; How bad is it going to be? What symptoms will occur? How will I cope with it? I worry if the pandemic ever going to end, as it has been much worse for MCS sufferers than the general public, although possibly MCS sufferers are used to not going out as much as the general public.'

Clinician's Comments

Patients with MCS report an increased sensitivity to various chemicals, even when present in low levels. MCS can present with diverse symptomology as this condition involves multiple organ systems. The most common symptoms are hyperosmia, asthenia, and dyspnoea¹. Cutaneous symptoms include dysaesthesia and pruritus, and therefore it is vital that dermatologists recognise this entity as these patients may present to a dermatology clinic. Our patient's cutaneous symptoms included a burning sensation and the feeling of numbness.

MCS has a large impact on patients' mental wellbeing and their ability to carry out activities of daily living due to the "hidden dangers" of environmental chemical exposure. This impact is further heightened by patients feeling that their condition is not recognised by others leading to a 'profound sense of invisibility'².

The prevalence of physician-diagnosed MCS has been found to be 0.5%³. No objective proof of a causal relationship between chemical exposure and symptoms has been shown and the pathophysiology remains unclear,⁴ although there appears to be overlap with other somatoform syndromes, such as

fibromyalgia. Many different chemicals are implicated, including insecticides, disinfectants, perfumes, weed killers, bleach, exhaust fumes and paints.

Due to its subjective nature, an unequivocal diagnosis is challenging. Diagnostic criteria have been proposed⁵ to help diagnose MCS (Table 1).

Clearly, avoiding multiple environmental substances is not possible or practical. Therefore, management focusses on coping techniques, support and treating any associated psychological distress or psychiatric illness.

This case highlights a poorly understood condition and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Table 1. Diagnostic Criteria- all should be met, with organic disorders excluded, for a diagnosis of Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS)⁵

1. Chronic condition
2. Symptoms that recur reproducibly
3. Response to low levels of exposure
4. To multiple unrelated chemicals
5. Improve or resolve when incitants are removed
6. Symptoms occur in multiple organ systems