What Is Multiple Chemical Sensitivity?

A one-page explainer to share with family, employers, landlords, schools, and clinicians

The short version: MCS (also called TILT — Toxicant-Induced Loss of Tolerance) is a real, physiological condition in which everyday low-level chemical exposures — fragrances, cleaning products, smoke, off-gassing materials — trigger genuine, often disabling reactions. It is recognized by health authorities internationally. It is not imagined, not "being difficult," and not a psychological disorder.

What it is

In a person with MCS, the body has lost its normal tolerance to common chemicals. Exposures most people don't notice set off a cascade of physical reactions involving the nervous system, mast cells (immune cells), and chemical-sensing receptors. Once this loss of tolerance develops — often after a major chemical exposure or a long low-level one — the person reacts to a widening range of triggers at lower and lower doses.

Why fragrance matters so much

Synthetic fragrance is the single most common and pervasive trigger. "Fragrance" on a label can hide dozens of undisclosed chemicals, and they travel — on clothing, hair, and breath, and through shared air and ventilation. For someone with MCS, walking into a room where someone is wearing cologne, or sitting near a plug-in air freshener, can mean hours or days of headache, brain fog, breathing trouble, nausea, or worse. This is why fragrance-free is not a preference — it is an access need.

What helps and what harms

What helps	What harms
Going completely fragrance-free around the person	Perfume, cologne, scented lotion or deodorant
Removing the source rather than masking it	Scented detergent, fabric softener, dryer sheets
Fresh air and good ventilation	Candles, incense, plug-ins, air fresheners
Clean air (HEPA + activated carbon filtration)	Smoke (tobacco, vape, wood) and vehicle exhaust
Advance notice so they can prepare or decline	New paint, carpet, furniture, and renovations
Believing them, and asking what they tolerate	Strong cleaning products and disinfectants

What you can do in one sentence

Show up fragrance-free, keep the air clean, ask what the person needs instead of guessing — and take their reactions at face value. Small changes from the people around them are often the single biggest factor in whether someone with MCS can work, attend school, keep housing, and stay connected.

Learn more & find the full toolkit: MCSDisability.com — including a doctor-visit packet, accommodation-letter templates, a symptom tracker, and a room-by-room home audit.

Educational information only — not medical advice. This page summarizes widely reported information about chemical sensitivity for general educational and awareness purposes. It is not a diagnosis and not a substitute for professional medical care. Individual triggers and tolerances vary widely; always ask

the specific person what they need.