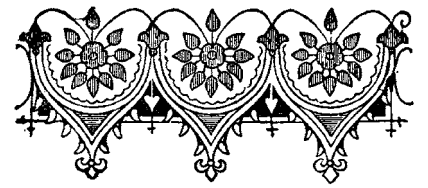


Health & Wellness



How Much Environmental Illness Do YOU Have?



Dr. Kate Thomsen and Silky

When I was in my residency and fellowship training in the 1980s and 1990s, I became aware of a condition called Multiple Chemical Sensitivity Syndrome. I was following a few patients with this condition – although I was not much help at the time. With each visit I listened to them tell me their most recent symptoms, for example: they could no longer walk down the personal products or laundry products aisles of the grocery store because the fragrances made them almost pass out, or, they would report they were bedridden for 2 days after only 30 minutes of cleaning up the basement. With each new symptom, I tried to see what the connection was in an effort to find the offending agent or mechanism but I never got it right. Most other doctors diagnosed them with malingering or psychosomatic reaction or anxiety, so these patients continued to make appointments with me despite my inability to offer a good treatment plan. I hope these people eventually got the support and guidance they needed since, in the intervening years, the spectrum of conditions called Environmental Illness (EI) has become better understood.

Environmental illness occurs when we are exposed to toxins or substances in the environment that make us sick. These health hazards may be in the home, the workplace, or the community. Individuals will react to some toxins and not to others. The same toxin may affect two individuals differently. The severity of symptoms also varies. Some people are “masking” some of their symptoms (especially to foods and fragrances) with persistent exposure. It seems so vague, but there are commonalities in

the way environmental illness manifests. EI is a multisystem disorder: it mostly affects the immune system, the nervous system and the endocrine system. It is also multi-symptom—people will have several to many symptoms in these body systems. Their symptoms can change and often “spread” (reacting to more environmental substances). Typically, no day is symptom free. While the conventional health care system has been slow to recognize EI, there is abundant medical research to support its existence. Research has pointed to environmental triggers for several conditions leading us to believe that they share some of the same mechanisms. These conditions are: chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, Gulf War Syndrome, Multiple Chemical Sensitivity, autoimmune conditions, asthma, atrial fibrillation, autism, airline pilot syndrome, and others. Interestingly, new animal research suggests that testosterone may play a protective role in environmental illness which may be why EI is more prevalent in women.

In its role of defender and protector, the body's immune response to “an invader” or “trauma” is supposed to be beneficial and short-lived. But, in EI the inflammation created by the immune response to the environmental trigger becomes unregulated and takes off like a runaway horse. Uncontrolled inflammation is at the root of the symptoms. Why is the immune system not able to control itself? Perhaps because it is already compromised by a chronic tick-borne infection or a load of mycotoxins from mold. These underlying conditions may be known or unknown. The adrenal “fight or flight” system may also be unable to respond. The delivery of oxygen to the cells becomes compromised, making the production of cell energy less efficient. Chronic fatigue or post exertional fatigue (out of proportion to the exertion, also called “payback”) are common features of EI.

The diagnosis of Environmental Illness requires the person to have: a cluster of

symptoms from several systems, a time line that places the onset of symptoms close to a potential environmental exposure, and the possibility that the exposure could produce those symptoms. Conventional blood tests will help to exclude other more common conditions that may (but usually aren't) the cause. For EI, we usually get blood tests that show if one is genetically more susceptible to the harmful effects of certain environmental toxins and not others. Blood testing for inflammation markers, adrenal balance, neurotransmitter function, and oxygenation can also be done.

What are the triggers causing EI? It is reported that one and probably more than one of these exposures are playing a role: Air contaminants (EMFs, carbon monoxide, mercury, lead, cadmium, pesticides, molds, solvents, natural gas, formaldehyde, carpets, glues, mold, radon), Water contaminants (pesticides, herbicides, solvents, chlorine), Food contaminants (preservatives and dyes, pesticides and herbicides, parasites, mold, bacteria) and Biologicals (pollens, tick-borne diseases, molds) It is the accumulation, a body burden, of these mostly “unnatural” compounds in genetically susceptible persons that changes a normal defense response into a chronic and often debilitating condition. But the prevalence of chronic disease coupled with our widespread exposures of the above listed toxins, assures us that we all have some degree of Environmental Illness. Do you recognize any of the symptoms in the box (at right)?

The onset of symptoms may be recognized as coincident with exposure to an offending agent(s). Common scenarios include those after: a move to a new home or workplace, a water leak with mold exposure or a musty basement, new carpeting, a new copy machine or new printer, new formaldehyde-filled cabinetry, pesticide exposure (nearby farmland, lawn care, termite or flea treatment), nearby power station or cell phone tower, bad well water, a diagnosis of Lyme

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Some Common Symptoms of Environmental Illness

- You have a daily or frequent morning headache (from mold in the house?)
- You feel worse in the mall. You feel worse in the big box stores under fluorescent lights.
- You have difficulty standing without crossing your legs.
- You get dizzy upon standing after tying your shoes
- You have blurry vision (seeing halos) while driving at night
- You are more sensitive to cats, newspapers, down pillows... The mail itches your hands
- You are more sensitive to smells from synthetic chemicals, strong perfume, smoke, rubber tires
- You hate to fly (airplanes contain many synthetic chemical exposures)
- You are irritated by clothing tags on your skin
- You never feel rested no matter how much sleep you get
- After (minimal) exertion, you have to rest for an unexpectedly long amount of time (payback)



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or other tick-borne infection. Mold is becoming an increasingly recognized biotoxin. Current building practices are making exposure more common and the stealth yet aggressive nature of mold toxins is making this the newest chronic health threat. With time, many people with EI become more and more sensitive to their environment (including foods, perfumes and even paper). This becomes debilitating.

Obviously, with environ-

mental toxins, one will feel better when not exposed to the toxin. Symptom-free vacations or holidays become a clue to detecting the causative trigger(s). Once recognized, removing oneself from the environment is mandatory for effective treatment. Detoxifying the body of the stored toxins, treating the runaway immune system and supporting the circulation, nutrient needs, energy, and hormones are all part of the treatment plan.

Dr. Kate Thomsen's office for holistic health care is located in Pennington, NJ. She is board certified in Family Medicine, certified in Integrative/Holistic Medicine, and an Institute for Functional Medicine Certified Practitioner. She has been practicing Functional Medicine for over 15 years. For more information visit www.drkatethomsen.com or call the office at 609-818-9700.