

Facts About Fragrances

Many individuals are sensitive to the chemicals contained in synthetic fragrances, including those suffering from asthma, those who have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) or other respiratory problems, and those experiencing symptoms of multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), a severe and chronic sensitivity or reaction to chemical exposures, especially air pollutants. Fragrance sensitivity is recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act as an impairment that may constitute a disability.

Fragrances are unregulated by government agencies. The United States cosmetics law does not give the FDA or any other federal regulatory agency the authority to require testing or approve fragranced products prior to their sale to the public. This absence of any oversight has led to many problems in terms of monitoring or tracking the impact on those that suffer from fragrance sensitivity.

The ingredients in fragrances are considered “trade secrets,” and do not have to be disclosed on labels. Fragrance formulas are vigorously protected by their manufacturers, and under current laws, have no disclosure requirements. Two industry trade associations, The International Fragrance Association (IFRA) and the Personal Care Product’s Association’s (PCPA) Cosmetic Ingredient Review (CIR), set voluntary safety standards which cosmetic and fragrance manufacturers can choose to follow or not. Essentially, the fragrance industry is self-regulated. Any tests that have been conducted are those relating to skin sensitivities only.

Chemicals commonly found in fragrances are known to have many health impacts. According to the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Science & Technology, “Approximately 95% of chemicals used in fragrances are synthetic compounds derived from petroleum. They include benzene derivatives, aldehydes and many other known toxics and sensitizers – capable of causing cancer, central nervous system disorders and allergic reactions.”

Fragrances are known to trigger asthma attacks. It is well known that the fragrance component of a product has the greatest potential to cause asthmatic symptoms. Asthma is a serious and chronic illness, affecting one in seven school-aged children. It is the leading cause of absenteeism, accounting for more than 14 million missed schools days each year. In 2010, asthma accounted for 3,404 deaths, 439,400 hospitalizations, 1.8 million emergency room visits, and 14.2 million doctor office visits.

Exposure to fragrances can trigger a variety of symptoms in sensitive individuals, including headaches, nausea, dizziness, weakness, loss of appetite, upper respiratory symptoms, shortness of breath, and eye and skin irritation. Children may not associate any of the above symptoms with exposure to fragrances, but parents and teachers should be aware of this association.

Exposure to fragrances can diminish a child’s ability to concentrate. The medical literature shows a link between synthetic fragrance chemicals and the following child behavior disorders: learning disabilities, hyperactivity and ADD (attention deficit disorder). In addition, many of the chemicals in fragrances that affect the central nervous system can cause fatigue and headaches, making it difficult for children to “do their best.”

Teenagers tend to “pour it on.” Many personal care products used by teens contain fragrances, especially perfume, cologne and after-shave, but also body wash, shampoo, hair spray, deodorant, lotions and creams, hand soaps and cosmetics. The use of multiple products containing fragrances amplifies the impact they can have on students and those around them.

Close proximity to other students increases the impact of fragranced products.

Schools have four times the number of occupants per square foot than most office buildings. This puts school children in close proximity to one another, increasing the impact of fragranced products.

Many cleaning products used in schools contain non-functional fragrances.

Manufacturers of institutional cleaning products often add synthetic fragrances to their products to make them smell “clean.” Since schools are generally cleaned every day, the use of these products can generate harmful VOCs, and leave behind chemical residues on desk and table surfaces, as well as floors. Other products commonly used in schools may also contain fragrances, including pencils, crayons, markers and white board cleaners.

Air fresheners are anything but. All types of air fresheners are designed to mask odors by releasing long-lasting synthetic scents into the air and diminish one’s sense of smell with nerve-deadening agents. When used regularly, air freshener chemicals build up in rugs and upholstered furniture, making it difficult to remove them from a room. These characteristics make them especially problematic for sensitive individuals.

Even products used at home can impact students in school. Fragrances are used in many household products, particularly laundry detergents and dryer sheets. Clothes washed and dried using these products are coated with a petroleum-based oily film that retains a strong long-lasting fragrance.

Fragrance-Free zones are becoming more common as we learn more. Many public places are establishing “fragrance free” zones. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) prohibits the use of fragrances by its employees and many organizations, schools, businesses and places of worship, such as the American Lung Association, the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health & Safety and the Massachusetts Nurses Association support fragrance-free zones.