



Roberta Bradley is scent sensitive to many things, so she wears a respirator mask when she ventures out of her home. She avoids crowds as much as possible, as perfumes and detergents make her ill.

Photograph by: Shaughn Butts, The Journal, Edmonton Journal

Michelle Marie has been skeptical about people with scent sensitivities ever since she worked with a woman who claimed to have them.

"She had signs plastered everywhere about it being a scent-sensitive area around her, but I had to interact with her a couple of times and wore hairspray and deodorant that I could smell, so I'm sure she could, too, and she was fine. She never said anything, never had any bad reaction that she said she always had.

"People always rolled their eyes around her," Marie remembers. "She may have had an allergy, but I think she made it out to be a lot worse than it was when she wanted attention."

Roberta Bradley has heard of skeptics like Marie: people who don't understand or, in some cases, don't want to understand about scent sensitivities because they think "it's scary," she says.

Scent-sensitive people don't react to odours, but to the chemicals in scented products and the off-gases they produce, says Bradley, vice-president of the Environmental Health Association of Alberta (eha-ab.ca), a new, non-profit support group for people with environmental illnesses. And it's not just perfumes and colognes; deodorants, laundry soap, aftershave, hair gel, cleaning products, plastics and rubber all give off scents that make some people feel sick.

"You would think an office is the safest place to work there is. What am I going to die from-- a paper cut? But...the carpet, the glue holding it in place, if you work in cubicles, the fabric dividers, the printers, the photocopiers all give off chemicals into the air," Bradley says.

Her sensitivity to co-workers' scented personal-care products gradually got worse, to the point where she could no longer work in the office. As a computer programmer, she can work from home (she attends meetings by phone) and her employer is OK with that.

Most people aren't so lucky, she says, and many are so chemically sensitive, they can't work at all.

Allergist Dr. Michael Lin estimates up to 30 per cent of the population has some form of sensitivity to chemicals. (A poll by Roper Reports Canada found 37 per cent of Canadian women look for cosmetics or skin-care products that are fragrance-free.)

Some people probably don't even know they have chemical sensitivity, but that's changing as it becomes more recognized and acknowledged by the public and doctors, Lin says.

NOT SYNONYMOUS WITH ALLERGY

Scent sensitivity is not an allergy, Lin explains; it's similar to the negative reaction people have to smoking or pollution, and more problematic in patients with underlying conditions such as hay fever or asthma. Scents aggravate symptoms such as a stuffy or runny nose, itchy eyes and rashes. They may cause asthmatics to wheeze or have difficulty breathing.

"If that's the case, you want to keep their other allergies under control with inhalers and other medications," Lin says.

But for people with no underlying allergies, there's often no clear treatment available other than to avoid the triggers, "but that can be difficult, because a lot of times you can't control what people wear at work," he says.

Some of his patients talk to their employers, or to the co-workers whose scents cause them problems, and in some cases that's enough to resolve the situation. (A growing number of workplaces, including the provincial government and Edmonton Public Schools, have adopted scent-free policies.)

"But some patients say they've spoken to their co-workers, but they refuse to stop wearing their perfumes and that kind of thing," Lin says.

People with scent sensitivities, such as those with physical disabilities, have a right to be accommodated in the workplace, says Louise Borle, northern director of the Alberta Human Rights and Citizenship Commission.

Since 2006, the commission has dealt with two complaints involving scent disabilities. In one case, the parties worked out their differences voluntarily; the other case ended up in court, Borle says.

The latter case involved Janice Brewer, a legal secretary for 20 years with the Edmonton law firm Fraser Milner Casgrain. In 1998, Brewer's family doctor suspected she had sensitivities to several chemicals. Her employer made several accommodations, asking staff to refrain from using perfumes and fragrances, permitting her to use an alternate washroom instead of the main women's washroom, providing air cleaners in her work area, allowing her to use charcoal-filtered masks when necessary and altering her work hours so she could avoid large crowds at the office.

Brewer's symptoms continued to be triggered at work, so a specialist was brought in to inspect her office. The specialist made recommendations in October 2001, but none were enacted by the firm.

Brewer left her job a month later and went on short-term disability. After unsuccessfully applying for long-term disability, she filed a complaint with the commission, claiming the law firm had discriminated against her on the grounds of a physical disability.

After an investigation, the complaint was dismissed, but Brewer took her case to the Alberta Court of Appeal, which found she had a legitimate complaint. After several more appeals, the Alberta Court of Appeal ultimately decided in favour of the firm in December 2008.

"Unfortunately, my pockets weren't deep enough to appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada so I wasn't able to go on," Brewer wrote in an e-mail to The Journal.

Roberta Bradley sees herself, Brewer and others like them as "canaries in the coal mine.

"I might be very sick and I know my symptoms, but I guarantee 100 per cent that everyone else is reacting to these same chemicals and just hasn't put together the cause and effect of chemical exposure with their symptoms."

We asked on twitter and on The Journal's facebook page ([facebook.com/edmontonjournal](https://www.facebook.com/edmontonjournal)) for your thoughts about scent sensitivities in the workplace.

Here's what some of you had to say:

- When someone reapplies so much perfume to cover up their smoking that you can smell them 10-plus feet away, it's too much.-@chowdown

- Perfumes/colognes don't really bother me if the person doesn't bathe in them. it does cross the line when people constantly "refresh" in their office or cubicle. a woman in my workplace complains when someone gets flowers, even. to me, that is going too far.-Jody Milbury Mcadam

- Certain scents on certain people -it's like their bodies just make the scent 10 times stronger than if others wear the same one.-@bellavino

- While i generally believe that blanket bans on scents or foods in places like offices are usually overreactions, i do have an alternative perspective on the issue. Growing up i didn't have any allergies, so i didn't really understand those that did. however, in my mid-20s i developed several, somewhat unusual allergies that made me rethink my perception. i'm now seriously allergic to the scent of lavender (which most people find a relaxing scent), so i do understand how scents can sneak up on people in a public space and cause problems. So, while i don't necessarily agree with a general ban, i believe that if a company has employees who have a sensitivity or allergy, they should educate the rest of the staff members about not wearing/applying that particular scent at work.-Shannon Collum

- Scents in the workplace are fine as long as people don't marinate in their perfume/cologne.-@ladybug18

- Just walk into the Bay, Southgate ... and you can't breathe, the perfume is so strong. i would get a headache just working there.-Joan Jacob Dittrich

- i wish people would be more thoughtful about others and then there wouldn't be any need for blanket bans. this is the same as second-hand smoke: respect those of us with sensitivities or allergies and then bans aren't necessary. Blow it in our faces and whine about personal freedom, and bans are on the way.-norman Weatherly

- Common sense about scents should apply. ... fewer rules, please! -lenny andrichuk

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