



## Smelling Good but Feeling Bad

Perfumes and colognes have become a part of our identities – our personal “signatures”. So when a co-worker tells you that your perfume is making her sick, you may tend to take offense. But try not to. She is probably not reacting to you personally but to one or more of the chemicals present in your perfumes or scent. Several research studies have shown that cologne or perfume – expensive or inexpensive- can contain chemicals that cause serious health problems for 15-30 % of the population.

### Why are fragrances a problem now?

Fragrances have been around since the beginning of human history. They have played important roles in religious rituals and everyday life. Times have changed and so have fragrances. Today, old fragrances have all but been replaced by synthetic chemical ingredients that mimic natural scents. There are more than 5,000 chemicals used in the manufacture of fragrances, most of which are derived from petroleum. Some are known to be toxic at high concentration. Most scents are 80-90% synthetic.

Perfumes are the most concentrated form of fragrance and they are *volatile* by nature which means they disperse into the air quickly and linger for a long time. A single cologne or perfume can literally have hundreds of different chemical compounds.

### Symptoms

Researchers have found that exposure to perfumes and other fragrances can cause irritation which can mimic the symptoms of allergies. Sensitive individuals can experience eye, nose, throat, irritation. They may have asthma-like reactions or attacks (broncho-constriction). The process behind the fragrance (chemical) – induced irritation is an altogether different phenomenon from allergies; however, people with pre-existing allergies such as hay fever react more strongly to irritant chemicals. Unfortunately, reactions to irritants are less responsive to

**WORK**  
shouldn't  
**HURT**

treatment than allergies. In fact, physicians say that the only effective way to treat the irritation is to completely avoid the offending perfumes or chemicals.

The National Academy of Sciences (NAS) believes that there is sufficient evidence that asthmatics exposed to some fragrances may suffer painful respiratory symptoms such as muscle spasms and excess mucous obstructing the airways.

Synthetic musk compounds found in perfumes may have neuro-toxic effects. When exposed, some people can have symptoms of dizziness, incoordination, confusion, difficulty concentrating and fatigue.

These symptoms can range from mild irritation to severe incapacitation.

### **Regulation**

The fragrance industry is completely self-regulated. It is almost impossible to find out the ingredients of any perfume or cologne because the compounds are closely guarded “trade-secrets”. Scented products are the only products in the US where the manufacturer is not required to disclose these trade secrets even to a physician! Doing more research on these scents will be nearly impossible until we get better regulation.

### **Are there safer alternatives to fragrances?**

Finding a safer scent or perfume can be tricky. *Natural* on a label implies the ingredients came from nature but even petroleum is from “nature”. Products labeled “natural” may contain some good plant-based ingredients. *Hypoallergenic* scents and perfumes may still contain potential irritants and toxins that trigger symptoms in some people. *Fragrance Free* only means that the product has no perceptible odor but synthetic fragrance ingredients (in hand lotions etc.) may be added to mask odors from raw materials.

Essential oils as a substitute for perfumes and scents may not always be a good alternative. Some oils may cause skin irritation and sensitization (allergy). Others such as white camphor, cinnamon, aniseed, eucalyptus may be toxic if used frequently. It is critical to refer to an aroma-therapeutic reference book to check the hazard information of each species for proper usage before using essential oils.

Some reputable companies strive for safer products but there is still no guarantee that they don't have offending fragrances. If you want to explore using safer scents, explore reputable companies such as: Aubrey Organics, Neways, Paul Penders, Ecco Bella, Bare Escentuals, Dr. Hauschka and Logona. You may also try looking at the “body care” section of Co-op America's National Green Pages directory at [www.greenpages.org](http://www.greenpages.org). As a rule always review the label even for these companies and go for simple products that state the ingredients and have the fewest ingredients.

We found a recipe for “safe” fragrance from Laurel Vukovic<sup>1</sup> who “swears” works well and doesn’t make her co-workers ill. AFT Health and Safety can’t endorse this recipe, but if you try it, let us know if it really solves the problem. Here goes:

To make a spray:

- Combine 10-20 drops of any essential oil and one (1) ounce of vodka in a glass spray bottle; *or*

For perfume:

- Combine 10 to 20 drops of any essential oil and 1 ounce of jojoba oil in a glass bottle with an airtight lid

Two of Laurel’s favorites are 1) 7 drops of lavender, 5 drops of sandalwood (Santalum album) and 5 drops of clary sage (Salvia sclarea); and 2) 6 drops of grapefruit (Citrus x paradise), 4 drops of lavender, 2 drops of rose and 2 drops of frankincense.

Laurel advises to shake perfumes well after creating them and storing them in a cool dark place. The fragrances last about six months.

### **Work-place policy**

Finding “safe” scents may not be a practical solution. Therefore, some unions have tried protective workplace policies. The AFT and other unions have worked with administrators to adopt “Scent-free” workplace policies to protect those who are sensitive to perfumes and scents. Some common elements of these policies include:

- Forming a joint labor management committee to oversee development of the policy
- Providing scent-free meeting rooms, conferences and workshops
- Declaring offices scent-free
- Restricting where scented products such as hairsprays may be used
- Posting signs asking students, clients, and visitors not to use perfumes/colognes/scents in the building

Please share any successful approaches or practices that your local has adopted and we’ll spread the word to other AFT locals.

To share your experience or to get more information, contact Darryl or Mike at AFT Health and Safety, phone number (202) 393-5677.

---

<sup>1</sup> Natural Health, April 2003. Weider Publications