

**Living With an Invisible Disability**  
**An MCS Story by Pat Becker**  
**January 2007**

Living with my environmental illness called Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) is a constant challenge.

I don't know what started my MCS illness. I went to many different doctors trying to get answers to why I was feeling so awful. I was becoming more sensitive to chemical smells. I started having unexplained muscle problems. It was difficult to get over my colds, and medications given for colds weren't helping. In 1992 my allergy doctor whom I saw for hay fever told me he also didn't know how to help me with my other health problems. He suggested I go see an Environmental Doctor.



The Environmental Doctor told me that I had MCS. He also told me, "Don't be surprised if people, even some doctors, don't accept MCS as a real illness." It was difficult to hear I had MCS. It was discouraging to hear I had an illness that often isn't recognized as a **real** illness. If someone told you that they had cancer, would you tell them, "You don't have cancer."? Would you tell them, "This is all in your head."? I knew I had a real illness and not a psychological problem. MCS is also referred to as an invisible disability.

I am allergic/sensitive to products with phenol, formaldehyde and ethanol. (These are in most products.) I am very allergic to second-hand cigarette smoke. Each MCS person seems to react in different ways when exposed to toxic chemicals. My reactions usually are a rash, muscle pain, "brain fog," or a sore throat that turns into a cough.

Other than our family, we don't invite guests over since they might bring chemical scents into our house. Even our house isn't always safe from toxins. A catalog might have a perfumed insert! I often have to air out magazines because of the ink smell. Outdoors I can be exposed to car fumes. Fragrance from fabric softener from our neighbor's outdoor dryer vent is a problem. When shopping I have to avoid laundry products, cleaning supplies, and the candle aisles. We use an air filtration machine in our vehicle and in our home.

Since I can't serve on church committees, I asked God to show me a way that I could serve Him from home. An idea came to me that I could pray for my entire family. For the past eight years I have been doing a prayer ministry. I have 38 family members. Each of them is assigned a calendar day. My thoughts and prayers are with that individual on their day and their picture is on our dining room table. I print a card that tells the person what day I will remember them.

I attend church when possible. I pick a short pew next to a pillar in the back with Larry on the other side of me. I walk out before the service is over. I had to give up singing in the choir and in church since I would get a sore throat from inhaling sanctuary fragrances.

When we travel, we call to reserve a smoke-free room and tell them not to fragrance spray the room after cleaning! I bring my own sheets and towels because of their laundry products. When Larry fills the car with gas, I stay at the motel or go to a fast food place to wait.

My medical help comes from "alternative doctors." Insurance companies don't recognize alternative doctors the same as traditional doctors. Most of my medical costs come out of our pocket! (Insurance companies need to cover **all** medical expenses the same.) I really miss attending my grandchildren's school and sporting events. At outdoor events, I take the risk of

cigarette smoke drifting. With indoor events, I deal with perfume/cologne, or I risk sitting close to a smoker with cigarette smell on their clothes.

I do not know what brought on my MCS. I know God is in control of my life and He is with me. He has a reason for my illness. God gives me a special kind of peace when I am homebound. God answers prayers so often when I need a doctor **now** because of muscle pain after a reaction from a chemical exposure. I call the clinic and there has been a cancellation or they have one opening! I am thankful for the support from Larry and my family. My life has definitely changed due to having Multiple Chemical Sensitivity.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **A Caregiver's Perspective Larry Becker (Husband of Pat)**

Pat is sensitive to perfume/cologne and second-hand smoke, which limits where she can go. Larry either goes alone or we both stay home.

Changes for Larry:

- Christmas dinners/banquets
- Ball games (indoor games and outdoor games)
- Concerts
- Eating only at restaurants that are totally smoke-free or get carry-out.
- Going to movies
- Can't have friends over (they could bring chemical fragrance into the house)
- Does a lot of the grocery shopping
- Most trips to Wichita are for doctor's appointments rather than just a time to shop or get out for a relaxed evening.
- We discuss questions like "What chemical set off Pat's health problem this time?"
- Constantly helping Pat watch for smokers and strong perfume when out together.
- Takes a lot of time and energy to be a caregiver.