

## Fragrances: Friend or Foe?

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Fragrances are everywhere in our world most noticeably in perfume and cologne but scents are increasingly finding their way into almost all personal care products (soaps, shampoos, conditioners, shaving creams, etc.), laundry products (detergents, anti-static sheets), air fresheners, candles and even some paper products. Some of these fragrances are derived from natural sources such as essential oils and can assist in healing; but, the vast majority of fragrances are synthetic aromatic chemicals derived from potentially harmful petroleum products.

Today, it is rare in our society not to know someone who is bothered by fragrances. More and more people are requesting "fragrance free" seating in restaurants, on airplanes, and in other places.

Synthetic fragrances contain harmful chemicals that pose serious health risks for many people, especially people with allergies, asthma, and chemical sensitivity. When people get ill from these fragrances it is not because of the smell per se, but because the fragrance is a vehicle for carrying molecules of toxic substances that enter the body through the skin or nose. Absorbed by the skin, the chemicals move quickly into the blood stream. If inhaled, the chemicals have easy access to (1) the brain causing neurotoxic reactions, especially effecting memory and emotion, and (2) the lungs precipitating allergic reactions including anaphylaxis, and asthma. Artificial scents are known to cause a host of other health problems including headache, fatigue, watery or dry eyes, double vision, tinnitus, vertigo, rashes, hypertension, as well as cancer and birth defects. Importantly, these potent scents can sensitize or cause healthy people to become ill, sometimes permanently.

As holistic nurses, we are in a key position to advocate for and accommodate to the needs of people who are adversely affected by artificial scents and some essential oils.

Know that even if a particular scent is not problematic to you, it may pose problems for others.

What to know:

- \* Fragrances are one of today's major sources of indoor air pollution.
- \* 95% of chemicals used in fragrances are synthetic compounds derived from petroleum.
- \* More than 80% of the ingredients in fragrances have never been tested for human toxicity.
- \* Fragrances, although under FDA jurisdiction, are one of the least regulated substances.
- \* Some fragrances contain chemicals designated as hazardous waste disposal chemicals such as methyl chloride, toluene, and ethanol.
- \* Fragrances are a "barrier to access" for some health conditions under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1992.

- \* Some institutions, like the University of Minnesota School of Social Work, have banned the use of perfume and cologne.
- \* People may adversely react to chemicals in selected essential oils: civet, galbanum, patchouli oil, asafetida, and burgamont oil.
- \* Secondhand smells are as much a problem as secondhand smoke.
- \* Some products labeled "unscented" may contain toxic "masking" fragrances.

What to do:

1. Avoid the use of synthetic fragrances and selected essential oils when at work or in public places.
2. Request fragrance free (toxic scent free) classes, meetings, conferences, etc.
3. Educate other health care professionals, clients, and the general public about the adverse health effects of some fragrances.
4. Speak up, if a particular fragrance is bothersome to you.
5. Subscribe to magazines that refrain from using fragrance inserts.
6. Write to the Office of Cosmetics and Colors, FDA, Washington D.C. 20204 about any problems with fragrances and scented products.

Resources:

Lawson, Lynn. Staying Well in a Toxic World Chicago: Noble Press, 1993

Stevens, Karen. "How Safe are Perfumes?" The Human Ecologist Fall, 1990, 14-17.

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