

Managing rental housing for people disabled by multiple chemical sensitivity

This article outlines special issues when managing rental housing for people with environmental illness. We cover both renting out a single dwelling as well as large multi-unit projects (apartments, cabins, homes).

Keywords: managing rental, housing, cabin, apartment, chemical sensitivity, MCS, electrical sensitivity, disability, environment

The need for special housing

People disabled by multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS) or electro hypersensitivity (EHS) are a unique clientele, unlike people with other disabilities.

People with these disabilities often have great difficulty finding accessible housing, due to their extreme sensitivities to many substances that are barely even noticed by the general population. In recent construction, the building products offgas a wide range of noxious fumes which may make the house uninhabitable for a decade or more.

In existing housing, prior renters' use of cigarettes, fragrances, pesticides and other chemicals will usually have contaminated the building, and mold may also be present.

There is therefore a market for specially built or modified housing that caters to people with these disabilities. Descriptions of several existing projects are available on this website through the link at the end of this article.

The environmentally ill as a group

People with environmental illness are not all the same, there are great variations in their sensitivities.

Most people with MCS can agree that mold, pesticides, fragrances and most conventional laundry products make them sick. But some enjoy using essential oils, while others are sickened just being near a person wearing them.

Some have pets in their home, while others get sick being around them.

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Some people cook outside on a hot plate because cooking odors bother them, while this is not a problem for others.

Some people are so sensitive that they are sickened by clothing that has been worn while inside a store or public restroom.

This is similar to allergies, where there is also great variation among people.

A number of other issues can be a problem for some people with environmental illness. The reason is not known, but probably related to damage to their neurological systems, which makes it difficult to adjust to changes in their environment.

Examples of common sensitivities:

- heat and/or cold
- light
- noise
- vibrations
- natural smells (such as flowers)
- electromagnetic radiation (EMF)
- chemicals (household products, personal care products, etc.)
- pollen
- mold
- drafts (especially from air conditioners)
- dust
- cooking odors

The first years

Any new construction or remodeling will produce fumes and odors from the new materials. This is the case no matter how well the materials were chosen and installed. The difference is that a conventional building might take well over a decade to become usable, while non-toxic construction may take from a couple of months to a few years.

During this initial period, vigorous ventilation is essential. Cross-ventilation with wide open windows is the preferred method. Some projects have sped up the process by keeping the indoor air temperature above 100°F/38°C for days at a time.

In the first couple of years, it may only be the less sensitive people who can move in. As the apartments become more offgassed, more sensitive people may start to

move in. Be aware of this possible trend, as these more sensitive people may complain about issues that did not trouble the first generation of less sensitive tenants.

Mixing with other groups

People with environmental illness must live segregated from the rest of the population, including people with other disabilities.

Some of the early projects were apartment buildings, where some of the units were converted, while people without environmental sensitivities lived all around. This did not work so well, as the neighbors' activities, dryer exhaust, etc., put substantial restrictions on the people with environmental illness. Some were basically confined indoors.

Renting out to regular people, even with various stipulations, will probably fail. People do not like to adhere to rules that do not make sense to them. When people are told that using certain products make their neighbors ill, they are still usually very resistant to change. Brand loyalties and other mechanisms are very difficult to overcome. This may be a particular problem in the United States with its hyper-individualistic culture.

Try-out period

There is no house in existence that works for all people with environmental illness. No matter how well designed, built and maintained a dwelling is, there will be people who do not feel well inside.

Prospective tenants often have to travel to see an apartment. That means they will get exposed to various substances en route and arrive not feeling well. In that condition, they may not be able to tell if they can live in the apartment. They will need to stay in it for some days to see how they feel.

Sometimes they feel okay in the beginning, but after a month or so get sensitized to some building product or mold in the apartment. If more than one apartment is available, the prospective tenant may feel better in another one.

It is best if the policies of the place recognize these particular needs by offering daily, weekly and monthly rates. Or offer a full return of the deposit within the first couple of months.

Short-term or long-term renters

Some projects are intended for short-term rentals, perhaps a few weeks or months, while the renter is being treated at a medical facility. Other projects are specifically for permanent residents.

Even though the short-term places may charge a rent equal to that of a nice hotel, many of them tend to gather a population which lives there long-term.

Consider offering long-term rates as well as short-term rates.

In some cases, rentals have later been sold off as condos, creating a mix of short-term rentals and permanent residents.

Seasonal effects

Some tenants may do well in the apartment during some seasons, and not so well in others.

The obvious explanation may be pollen, but it can also be the temperature or humidity affecting the offgassing of the apartment. When it is hot, building materials and their contaminations will offgas at a faster rate than when it is cold. This can make a difference in the wellbeing of the tenant.

The summer makes it easier to vigorously ventilate the apartment, unless the outdoor air quality is terrible. Another option is to run an air conditioner to keep the inside cool and thus less offgassing. The winters are difficult for some people, as there is less ventilation from open windows.

House rules

Special house rules are essential for a multi-unit environmental housing facility. They need to be specific and clearly written. Each tenant must be given one before or upon move-in.

The house rules can serve three important purposes:

- prevent contamination damage
- prevent mold damage
- prevent conflicts among renters

There are many levels of sensitivity. Some people tend to only use safer products to the extent they need to for themselves, or they simply feel bad all the time and are not aware that certain products contribute to their constant pain.

Less-toxic products often cost more than regular products, which discourages some people from using them. Not all less-toxic products are safe; some contain essential oils which are problematic, for instance.

The products and habits of one person may be harmful to the neighbors, even at a substantial distance.

This author knows of three cases where a tenant contaminated their rental unit to the extent that it could not be rented out for a year or more, and substantial effort was needed to remedy the contamination. The situation can be avoided by stipulating that no source of fragrances, natural or synthetic, may be used in the apartment. Particularly stipulate that this ban includes essential oils, scented candles or any other forms of dispensers or personal care products.

The house rules should stipulate that the renter keep the apartment heated to at least 62°F/17°C. It could also be added that the renter must keep two windows open for at least five minutes daily (unless there is serious air pollution outside, such as a forest fire). This is to avoid mold damage, which has happened in multiple rentals already. See the following section for details.

Many problems can be avoided by having detailed house rules in place. It can be helpful to look at the house rules for similar housing facilities.

Heating

Almost any heating system will cause problems, especially ducted systems and systems using oil, gas or wood. When the system is turned on for the first time since summer, it may need to “burn off” dust accumulations for a few hours with open windows.

Consider having some portable electric heaters available to lend to those who do not tolerate the heating system. Perhaps have a variety of systems, such as quartz heaters and low-EMF resistance heater models, available to loan out.

People have coped in various ways, such as sitting outside in a car or going for a walk while the house is heated up. This may be done multiple times a day.

Occasionally a renter will insist on having no heat at all during the winter. This will cause condensation on exterior walls and ceilings in almost any climate, even in a desert. Several houses and apartments have been ruined by mold after just a few winters without proper heat (this author knows of cases in both Texas and Arizona). Mold remediation can be very costly and may not even be possible

without major renovations. The result can be that the apartment can no longer be rented out.

As mentioned earlier, the renter must be compelled to properly heat the apartment or face eviction. Consider making it a part of the rental contract.

Use of outdoor spaces

The renters will need access to outdoor spaces, as open air may make various activities much more possible than inside enclosed spaces.

This may include:

- receiving and opening packages
- receiving visitors
- reading books
- offgas newly purchased goods
- sleep outside during maintenance or other contamination
- work with a computer (to vent off fumes)
- cooking (if sensitive to cooking odors)

The outside air may simply be better than inside the apartment, especially in the first years.

Not all the listed uses are possible or allowed in all existing housing projects.

Laundry uses

Sharing laundry machines with regular people simply does not work. Even sharing with other people with environmental illnesses is a frequent cause of conflict among tenants. The laundry products used by one person may leave a residue that contaminates the clothes of the next user.

The aerosols/fumes generated from a laundry product may bother some people to the point that they must use the laundry on separate days. And this may even be when using non-toxic laundry soaps, that most people with MCS have no problem with.

These problems are generally solved in a variety of ways, such as some (or all) apartments having designated machines, sign-up sheets, private agreements, etc. The manager may need to facilitate such solutions.

A list of approved laundry products is very helpful. A list of banned products is absolutely essential. Dryer sheets of any kind should be completely banned.

An outdoor clothes line is very helpful to some renters.

Expect more use of the machines than with regular renters, as sensitive people usually need to wash new garments many times before they are usable.

Furniture, air cleaners, etc.

Considering supplying a basic set of furniture, at least for short and medium term renters. Outdoor patio furniture of glass and steel is generally a good choice. Outdoor furniture of wood is treated with toxic chemicals and won't work. Even indoor furniture of wood is often problematic because of the wood terpenes (maple and cottonwood are better).

Supplying a regular or organic mattress is often problematic, both in terms of tolerance of the product and that it cannot be washed. If you use a mattress, make sure to protect it with barrier cloth, and cotton pads on top.

What some places do is supply a set of cotton mattress pads — about seven — to serve as a kind of futon. These are washed when the tenant moves out.

Supplying one or two carbon air cleaners is common. There are several models that are popular with the MCS community because they are made of powder-coated steel and are designed better than the typical store-bought plastic models. In the United States, look for the brands Austin Air/HealthMate, Aireox and E.L. Foust.

Linen and cleaning services

Some of the housing facilities cater to short or medium-term renters and offer linen with the room. The linen may be changed by staff who clean the room on a weekly basis.

In some places, linen is supplied, but the tenant is responsible for washing their own linen, and cleaning their own room.

The places intended for long-term stays typically do not offer these services.

If offering linen and cleaning services, some people will not tolerate the products used and will need to opt out. One place offers that the floor is simply mopped with water and nothing else.

EMF issues

Some people with MCS are also electrically sensitive. That means they may get symptoms from the radiation from cell phones, computers, wireless networks, cordless phones, household wires, refrigerators, TVs, etc. This radiation is not stopped by walls and ceilings.

Some are also bothered by noise, to the point it can create symptoms as well. Examples of problem noises are a refrigerator, the neighbor's television, fan or air conditioner.

People who "only" have MCS may not have much understanding of these people's problems, and not be willing to turn down their TV, go outside to use their cell phone, or use a cable to hook up their computer.

These are issues that will have to be dealt with by mediation and policies, preferably up front in the house rules.

It will be helpful if the renters are offered cabled telephone and internet services so they do not have to use wireless.

Landscaping

Consider adapting the landscaping for optimum health. Open sunny landscaping reduces mold that can blow through the windows. Avoid a lot of trees that can cover the ground with rotting leaves, or make sure to remove them. There should be no bushes or other vegetation that shades the ground around the building, as mold likes shady areas.

Lawns can work well, if they are not treated with chemicals. Many sensitive people are bothered by the terpenes from fresh-cut grass, so it can be helpful to give the renters notice a day before the grass will be cut. Some may want to go shopping or otherwise leave the building that day.

Maintenance

Upkeep is an essential part of managing a building project, but it is complicated as people with MCS generally do not tolerate new materials and fresh paint. Even outside maintenance can be a problem, especially painting.

Inside maintenance is very difficult, as it may mean the tenant cannot live there for a while, perhaps not for many months.

Materials specifically marketed as non-toxic, “no VOC” or “safe for the chemically sensitive” are often problematic when new. Some people are simply sickened by those materials for months or even years after they have been applied.

Keep several sheets of drywall on hand and stored in a dry place with all their sides exposed to the air, so they can offgas. They cannot be stored together with paints, oil, gasoline or where natural gas is used, as the drywall will absorb the fumes and become unusable.

Inside maintenance should be deferred until the apartment is vacated, if possible. Otherwise the choice of materials and procedures should be discussed with the tenant, and the tenant given the option of moving with at least 30 days’ notice.

Some maintenance may be deferred to a time when the window can be open all the time, to air out the place and make the apartment tolerable faster.

Molds

Mold can make an otherwise safe house uninhabitable, even in the desert. Even if they cannot be seen or smelled, molds can build up inside walls, insulation and wooden cabinets where they emit their spores and noxious gases, which people with environmental illness are usually particularly sensitive to.

The presence of some types of mold can be objectively verified with mold tests, which are available from a number of clinics and businesses catering to people with environmental illness and allergies.

It is difficult to eradicate mold. It may require replacing drywall and other building products, which due to their newness then become a problem. Ozone does not eradicate mold, as it does not reach the parts of the colonies that are inside the building material.

The best method is prevention. This means to quickly repair leaky roofs, leaky pipes and attend to places where condensation occurs. Adequate drainage around the building should also be ensured, to avoid any flooding.

Otherwise, bring in a mold specialist. Much preferably one who also understands MCS.

Low-income renters

People who need this type of housing are often too sick to work. Many subsist on government assistance and cannot afford the premium price of healthy housing.

Many countries have various forms of government housing assistance. Consider accepting payment from such a program.

The housing assistance program in the United States is called Section 8. Low-income people apply and get on a waiting list. Once approved, the program follows the person as she moves. The landlord's part involves minor paperwork and an on-site inspection. The amount the program pays depends on the area. Some local offices may pay more if no cheaper housing that accommodates a disability (such as MCS) is available. You can't charge more than what Section 8 allows.

On-site manager

Most of the existing projects have some sort of on-site manager. In many cases, it is the owner of the facility. In some cases, the manager is a long-term renter who gets free or discounted rent.

The on-site manager shows available apartments to prospective tenants, receives requests for repairs and looks after general upkeep. She may also receive rent payments, keep the books, hand out linen and sell bottled water and approved laundry products.

As the on-site manager may need to enter the apartments and generally interact with the tenants, it is highly recommended that he or she lives a semi-non-toxic lifestyle. At the very least, he or she should refrain from using any fragranced personal care products, fabric softener, etc. And be a non-smoker. When hiring the manager, these requirements must be made clear up front and are best included in the contract. People can be very attached to these products and very resistant to foregoing their use, even when told they harm their tenants. It is easy to make up excuses. Common ones are: "it's only a little bit" or "it can't possibly be such a big deal" or "I should be allowed to do what I want".

The manager may also be called upon to mediate in conflicts between renters.

Training of the manager

In most cases, the building manager is already very familiar with the needs of people with MCS. The manager may have the illness herself or have a family member with MCS.

If the building manager is not intimately familiar with the needs of people with MCS and EHS, he or she will need training. This clientele is unlike any other,

including people with other types of physical or mental disabilities. It is not acceptable that the first people who move in have to educate the manager. This will cause many problems as the renters have little ability to persuade a skeptical manager who holds substantial power of harm over the tenants.

It is essential that the building manager is trained by someone from the outside who is in a position of authority. This could be a physician or an experienced manager of another similar housing facility. A mentor relationship on an ongoing basis would be best.

In one MCS development the new manager had prior experience handling renters with substance abuse problems, but no training about MCS. This caused a lot of conflicts with the early renters, one of whom sued and won a settlement that included various accommodations of the disabled renters.

Trauma victims

Any chronic life-altering illness is a major stressor, whether the patient is dealing with chronic pain, loss of a limb, disfiguring burns, diabetes, severe respiratory illness, cancer or much else. Chemical and electrical sensitivities are also life-altering illnesses, where the patients, in addition to the illness itself, have to cope with not being safe in a world that can be quite hostile. Patients can lose their income, be forced to abandon their homes and may even be ridiculed by family, ignorant health professionals and others.

People with any type of chronic life-altering illness have a higher risk of also developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can manifest in a variety of ways, such as hypervigilance, depression, anxiety, combative anger or social withdrawal. This is a touchy subject in general, and especially for people with MCS or EHS, who are often falsely accused of having an “all in your head” illness.

As a landlord/manager, it can be helpful to recognize the signs of PTSD in a tenant, especially if there is some sort of conflict that has to be dealt with.

More information

This website has several articles about specific environmental rental projects, individual dwellings, construction methods, etc. They are available through www.eiwellspring.org/saferhousing.html.

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