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# DO YOU HAVE AN ENVIRONMENTAL ILLNESS?

## What Happens When the Modern World Makes You Sick

**O**ur environment determines our health. Everything we eat, breathe, touch, and surround ourselves with affects the functioning of our bodies. And from carpet fibers to mold spores, from pesticides to cell towers, toxic triggers are everywhere. When we hear the phrase “environmental health,” we often think about sustainability, low carbon emissions, and recycling. But what about the term “environmental *illness*”?

### Endlessly Searching for Health Answers

With mounting numbers of cases of autoimmune conditions, autism, and neurodegenerative diseases, our society as a whole is getting sicker.<sup>3</sup> Which sends many of us doctor-hopping. It's not because we're hypochondriacs, but because we are innately aware that our bodies are dysfunctioning—something's not right, it's getting worse, and we don't know why. But after being poked and prodded with scopes and scans, moved from one waiting room to the next, we are met with neither a diagnosis nor a cure.

When Western medicine and pharmaceuticals fail us, we reach for acupuncturists, Reiki masters, and homeopaths. But often even these highly attuned holistic healers also come up dry. None of this is to denigrate modern and alternative medicine. We absolutely need medical specialists, surgeons, and energy-balancing modalities. But when both allopathic and naturopathic interventions fail to restore us to good health, then what? Unfortunately, just like with searching for our misplaced keys, we often look last where we should look first.

Environmental illness considers the impact that our comprehensive environment has on our biochemical functioning. This is a transformative paradigm for understanding disease, not only in healing but also in preventing chronic health conditions.

### Precaution, Not Treatment

Our bodies are built to process toxins. But over time, stressors and toxins—biological, chemical, electromagnetic, and emotional—accumulate, causing toxic buildup. And in our post-industrial, highly-processed, synthetic, microwaved environment, our bodies can easily get overloaded. The upshot is that we get sick.

Sometimes this toxic buildup instigates episodes of (unexplained) headaches, rashes, and fatigue. Other times, the accumulation produces a spiraling list of food sensitivities. And if left unaddressed, depending on the individual's physiology, epigenetics, and exposures, the toxins can manifest as chronic chemical sensitivity and electromagnetic sensitivity.

The first step toward environmental detoxification is rethinking the relationship between disease and environment. Although we are increasingly compassionate about caring for Earth's natural environment, we're blindly ignoring the fact that our unnatural, man-made environment is making us sick.

This is about precaution versus treatment—the idea being to stop the disease before it starts. As a society, we are caught in a harmful cycle that ignores the ground-zero problem: We keep using and reusing what's making us sick in the first place.

Peter Sullivan, founder of Clear Light Ventures, explains: “Let's say you get cancer, and it's from some environmental factor. You go to the hospital, you get chemo which is adding more chemicals to your body, and then you go home, back to the same routine environment that gave you cancer in the first place.

So in an ideal world, you would leave the sick building you were in, go to a known safe space, have a building biologist check your space and mitigate it. Then you repair your body back to health, and you return to a safe environment.”

If this sounds incredibly logical, that's because it is. We're just not doing it.

### Disconnect

In *Slow Death by Rubber Duck*, Rick Smith states that “over the past few decades, pollution has changed dramatically in the following important ways: 1) It is now global rather than local. 2) It's moved from being highly visible to being invisible. 3) In many cases its effects are now chronic and long-term rather than acute and immediate.”<sup>2</sup>

The way in which we pollute has changed, but our approach to health and disease has not. Dr. Stephanie McCarter, board-certified specialist in internal medicine at the Environmental Health Center in Dallas, says there's a disconnect in our pharmaceutical-based medical system. If the drug's not in the pharmaceutical-sponsored medical journals, physicians don't know about it. “People go to the ER over and over and over. They're just given medicines to treat their symptoms. The doctors can't find what's actually wrong because they are not being educated on looking for the causes of their illness or the effects on the body from electromagnetic fields and chemicals.”

Sullivan believes this approach is bound to fail us: “We're just masking pain instead of trying to find the root cause of the pain and why it's there. That's like saying I'm going to fix your car by turning off the warning light.”

## The “Why” Question

There’s no “one size fits all” for environmental sensitivities—no single disease or one affected organ. Rather, this “condition reflects the unique metabolic characteristics and nutritional status of the body, the biological individuality and genetic background, and the integrity of the body’s immune and enzyme systems,” says clinician Carolyn Gorman.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Riina Bray, of the Environmental Health Clinic at Women’s College Hospital, University of Toronto, explains: “What’s happening is the body is in a state of stress—biochemical,

psychological, social, and spiritual. That sets the stage, so if an individual is exposed to chemicals or other toxins, then that person will not deal as well as others. And if the genetics aren’t great, that individual won’t bounce back, so the condition becomes chronic. The chronic nature of this is a total-load model. You’re filling that barrel, it finally gets to the very top, and you can’t get rid of symptoms. So we have to address all of the stressors.”

McCarter highlights that an individual with environmental illness “has had enough exposures that their immune and non-immune defense mechanisms are no longer functioning well. Every trigger in the environment affects them,

and they’re not able to adapt anymore.” When in this state, the nervous system is imbalanced, there is significant nutrient deficiency and inflammation, and the body becomes maladaptive.

The affected person can then become “blind” to certain trigger agents, no longer aware of what’s making them sick. Dr. William J. Rea, founder of the Environmental Health Center in Dallas, explains: “This adaptive phenomenon can be very detrimental. Your body adapts to a stressor like the odor of formaldehyde, so after a while, you no longer perceive the effect it produces, but it still causes damage.”

## Total Environmental Load / Non-Specific Load

### AIR CONTAMINATION

#### Outdoor

- Sulfur compounds
- Nitrous compounds
- Ozone
- Carbon monoxide
- Particulates
- EMF fields
- Lead, cadmium, mercury
- Pesticides, molds algae, etc.

#### Indoor

- Natural gas, oil, coal
- Pesticides
- Formaldehyde
- Solvents
- Fumes
- Carpets + glues, etc.

#### Physical

- EMF
- Radar
- Radon
- Microwave
- Sun spots
- Heat
- Cold
- Positive ion

#### Water

- Pesticides - herbicides
- Solvents
- Chlorine
- Gasoline + additives

#### Food - Man-made

- Pesticides
- Colorings
- Dyes
- Preservatives
- Cooking
- Transportation

#### Food - Natural

- Botulism - bacteria
- Parasites
- Virus
- Solanin
- Night shades
- Glycosides, etc.
- Mold

#### Biological

- Pollen
- Molds
- Foods
- Parasites
- Virus
- Bacteria



**Specific Environmental Load**  
i.e., *Streptococcus hemolyticus*, chloradane, ionizing radiation

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## Biochemical Perspective

What's really going on at the microcellular level? Dr. Martin Pall, professor emeritus of biochemistry at Washington State University, has done extensive research on the biochemical mechanisms behind environmental sensitivities. Specific to electromagnetic fields, Pall's work indicates that "microwave and other low-frequency electromagnetic fields have been shown to act by activating voltage-gated calcium channels with most biological effects being due to elevated intracellular calcium, consequent nitric-oxide elevation and either peroxynitrite or nitric-oxide signaling."<sup>6</sup>

In essence, Pall's research describes the biological changes produced by chemical and electromagnetic exposures. And these biological changes include all the bad stuff that can lead to chronic disease: oxidative stress, breaks in cellular DNA, blood-brain barrier breakdown, depressed melatonin levels and sleep disruption, cancer, infertility, immune dysfunction, neurological dysfunction, and cardiac dysfunction.<sup>6</sup>

Given that our world is hyper-toxic, causing our biochemistry to go haywire as a result of ongoing exposure to toxicity, what we are left with as a result is a spiral of cellular stress, leading to physiological dysfunction and chronic disease.

To end this toxic cycle, we need a perspective change. Instead of searching for the miracle drug—be it the antidote for cancer or painkiller for numbing nerve damage—perhaps we simply need to eliminate the toxic overload stressing our bodies.

## Prescription for a Healthier Lifestyle

Yes, there is hope for healing our bodies and our environment. But there's no shortcut. Lewis Rowlands, a nutritional balancing practitioner, works with many environmentally sensitive clients. He explains the body like this: "What happens is you live in an incredibly complex mansion, but for 30 years, no one's done any cleaning or fixed any issues. There've been storms, earthquakes, but you're no wiser to the situation. You've got to rebuild the mansion from the inside, but you've got to live in it at the same time."

A clean diet, a nontoxic lifestyle, and proper detoxification methods are key to healing. McCarter says: "We teach people to have a really clean environment, which allows the immune system to build back up. It's so crucial to have a home environment that's a sanctuary."

## ENVIRONMENTAL ILLNESS

You may be chemically sensitive if you experience one or more of the following:

- The smell of perfume gives you a headache, causes muscle aches, or makes you feel ill.
- Cleaning products or chemical "deodorizers" give you a headache or other negative symptoms.
- You hold your breath when walking down the detergent aisle in the supermarket.
- You've had an adverse reaction to a pesticide; reactions such as headaches, fatigue, respiratory problems, nausea, or skin rashes.
- You've had an unusual reaction to a medication.
- You avoid reading certain books, magazines, and newspapers that smell heavily of ink or colored print.
- You feel ill after being in homes with scented candles, incense, potpourri, plug-in air fresheners, or scented laundry products.
- You get a headache, eye irritation, or cough when exposed to tobacco smoke.

This is not a comprehensive list. But if you answered yes to any of these questions, this could indicate a heightened degree of environmental sensitivity, and you should consider consulting an environmental medicine physician. Visit the American Academy of Environmental Medicine to find a professional near you:


[AAEMOnline.org](http://AAEMOnline.org).

Environmental medical physicians, metabolic specialists, and clinical nutritionists have the leg up on how to approach healing. For each person, they gather an extensive case history, evaluate the total load, and isolate not only the variables but also the toxic trigger agents. Protocols are targeted individually, and include strict pollutant avoidance, nutrient treatment, dietary manipulation, injection therapy, immune modulations, oxygen therapy, detoxification, and mind-body-spirit work, among other modalities and approaches. As Bray says: "When I see patients, I am not thinking about just the three systems of neuro-immune-endocrine. I'm looking at everything. Because every system affects every other system."

### Buyers, Beware

Navigating what is safe for our bodies and living spaces is a tangled journey. There's a great deal of misinformation combined with naïveté. Too often we believe that the products on store shelves or the infrastructures built up around us are harmless, on the assumption that pre-market testing has adequately satisfied established safety standards.<sup>2</sup> But we need only look to the history of tobacco, radon, asbestos, and BPA plastic to know that this bastion of trust is fantasy.

Given the lack of proper regulatory oversight over our food, products, and technologies, we need to make our own informed decisions. We must ask the serious questions: Why is glyphosate, a probable human carcinogen, found in our popular snack foods?<sup>7</sup> Why are we spraying pesticides that are known neurotoxins?<sup>2</sup> Why are we living in an electrosmog soup of wireless radiation that has known neuropsychiatric effects?<sup>5</sup>

Bray emphasizes: "Examine your environment. Examine your school. Examine your home. We really need to make it second nature to do this." It's up to us to choose less-toxic options. Our health vitally depends on it. 

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## THE NONTOXIC WAY TO CLEAN

Rid your home of toxins and make sure to clean with nontoxic products—here are some effective cleaning alternatives.

**Baking soda:** cleans, deodorizes, scours, removes stains.

**White vinegar:** cuts grease, cleans windows, unclogs drains, acts as a mild disinfectant and deodorizer, works as a fabric softener in the wash.

**Lemon juice:** bleaches, deodorizes, cleans.

**Coarse table salt:** removes rust—and combined with lemon juice, polishes copper.

**Olive or walnut oil:** polishes furniture, removes non-latex paints and adhesives from hands.

**Borax:** cleans, bleaches, deodorizes, and controls ants and cockroaches.

**Washing soda:** cuts grease, scours, removes stains.

**Vegetable-based liquid soap (or Castile soap):** a general-purpose cleaner.

**Grapefruit-seed extract:** a concentrated natural disinfectant that can be added to liquid hand soap as well as dish and laundry detergents.

**Hydrogen peroxide:** removes stains, can be used as a mild alternative to chlorine bleach.

## WHAT EXACTLY IS MAKING US SICK?

Common chemical irritants include:

- Pesticides and herbicides
- Natural gas
- Petroleum-based solvents like toluene and benzene
- Volatile organic compounds, like formaldehyde
- Heavy metals, like mercury and aluminum
- Molds and mycotoxins
- Tobacco smoke
- Phthalates and other endocrine-disrupting compounds, like BPA
- Flame retardants, like PBDEs
- Automobile exhaust fumes
- Perfumes, air fresheners, and "scented" products
- Newspaper print
- Personal-care products
- Laundry detergents and fabric softeners
- Household cleaners
- Fluoride-containing water and toothpaste
- Common electromagnetic threats include:
  - Wi-Fi fields
  - Wi-Fi signaling from computers and tablets
  - Cellphone and other microwave towers
  - Cordless phones and base stations
  - Cordless or wireless communication devices
  - Radar units
  - "Smart" meters
  - Extremely low-frequency fields coming from our wiring
  - Digital inverter boxes
  - High-frequency transients in the electric wiring
  - Compact fluorescent light bulbs
  - Digital power supplies