

Eco-Health FAQs

What are environmental illnesses?

Environmental illness (EI) is an overarching term that is used to describe the illnesses that some people have whose symptoms occur or worsen when they are exposed to chemicals and substances in the environment, on other people, and on themselves. People with an EI can have mild to life-threatening reactions when they are around the chemicals and substances that make them react. Some common reactions that people can experience include difficulty breathing; swelling of lips, tongue, airway; rashes; hives; flushing; itching; watery eyes; blurred vision; anxiety; feelings of impending doom; cognitive impairments; flu-like symptoms—and this is a partial list.

I've never heard of EIs!

Yes, you have! Asthma is an EI. Lung cancer from cigarette smoking is an EI. Mesothelioma, the malignant cancer people often get from exposure to asbestos, is an EI. Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) is an EI. Mastocytosis and mast cell activation related disorders are EIs. Allergies—food allergies (for example, to nuts or strawberries), allergies to pollen, dust, mold, pets—are all EIs.

What are mast cells?

Everyone has mast cells throughout their body. When a person comes in contact with a chemical or substance to which they may react, their mast cells degranulate and give off histamine and other chemicals. The histamine and other chemicals pumped into their system by the degranulating mast cells cause the person to exhibit the symptoms we typically associate with an allergic reaction: sneezing, watery eyes, rashes, hives, itching, tongue swelling, difficulty breathing, runny nose, skin flushing, and more.

In a mast cell related disorder, something has gone wrong with the mast cells. There may be, for example, too many of them, they could be irregularly shaped, or they could be degranulating—as in mast cell activation spectrum disorders—and be over-active for unknown reasons. A person with a mast cell related disorder can experience severe and life-threatening reactions after an exposure to even very small amounts of a chemical or substance; so small an amount that person without an EI would not even be able to detect the chemical's presence.

What do people with EIs have to do to not get worse?

People with chronic EIs must avoid and minimize their exposures to the chemicals and substances to which they react. They may need to avoid small and large groups of people, public places (like libraries, restaurants, buses, trains, offices, parks), car exhaust, certain foods, cell phones, soaps and detergents, electrical currents, plastics—and this is not a complete list of all the triggers. EIs can be permanently disabling for some while others are able to continue working once reasonable accommodations are in place.

I don't understand about triggers.

The word 'trigger' refers to whatever chemical or substance it is that makes a person with an EI have a reaction. The specific triggers that cause a reaction, and the reactions themselves, are different for different people.

Frequently individuals with an EI wear face masks with activated charcoal filters to decrease their exposure to the chemicals in the environment. It is important to remember that in order to receive healthcare, a person with an EI must intentionally put themselves into an environment, (the doctor's office, hospital, clinic, health center, private practice office,) that has the potential to cause them permanent, irreversible harm and damage.

What kind of doctor do you see if you have an EI?

There are several different specialization areas for doctors and medical professionals who work with clients with EIs. Many MDs specialize in Environmental Medicine. Other doctors specialize in Immunology. There are MDs who are mast cell specialists. Doctors who specialize in pulmonary—breathing—problems may also be knowledgeable about chemical sensitivities and work with clients who have an EI.

Why is it challenging to provide care for people with EIs?

A person with an EI can experience mild to life-threatening reactions when they are exposed to chemicals and substances in their environment, on other people, and on themselves. Many of the EI triggers are common household items—soaps, cleaners, detergents, shampoos, lotions, plastics. The people who are providing support services for clients with chronic EIs must be trained in order to understand the illnesses, the disease process, triggers, reactions, and what they need to do to protect their clients' health and safety.

Having an EI affects all aspects of the person's life and impacts their families, friends, relationships, and the environments in which they spend time. This is especially significant when it comes to healthcare, support services, and most critically anyone who may enter or spend time in their home.

More questions about EIs? Please ask us!