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THE PLAIN DEALER

Often misunderstood, environmental illnesses are gaining attention, thanks to 'green' movement



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You move to a new city and into an old house that you fall in love with at first sight.

A year later, you develop a nagging cough that even the strongest prescription cough syrup can't seem to tame.

At first your doctor says your symptoms are all in your head but then suggests you might have some kind of incurable respiratory disease.

She refers you to an ear, nose and throat specialist. After a battery of tests, he concludes that you have borderline asthma and puts you on two daily medications.

A couple of years later, you still have the cough, but it's not as bad. Another new doctor decides you have allergies and switches your medication.

A friend of yours suggests you get your house tested for mold.

It sounds weird, but he explains that it's the same advice he just got from his doctor.

He developed a sensitivity to mold that in recent years had grown much worse. A visit to an expert in neurotoxic poisoning confirmed what he suspected for a while: Other doctors may have been diagnosing and treating him for illnesses he didn't have.

If he didn't change his surroundings, his situation could turn deadly.

The scenario, based on experiences of real people, is typical of many who suffer from environmental illnesses or chemical sensitivities.

Often their symptoms mimic other more well-known conditions, whose treatments may address the symptoms but not the core problem.

The American Academy of Environmental Medicine has been working toward finding the cause of these conditions for the past 40 years.

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Possible signs of an environmental illness:

- Headaches while talking on your cell or cordless phone.
- Increased sense of smell, especially to items such as perfume, laundry detergents, cats, etc.
- Increased sensitivity to fluorescent light.
- A diagnosis of adrenal fatigue, or thyroid deficiency or overactivity.

Tips from Dr. Michael Roizen, Cleveland Clinic:

- One of the keys — especially here in Cleveland — is to air one's house out. Over the course of a winter, the quality of inside air becomes worse than outside air, he said. It doesn't hurt to open the windows periodically on good days during the winter.
- Avoid materials — household cleaners, rugs, air fresheners, even some furniture — that emit lots of volatile hydrocarbons. As Roizen put it, "You want to use cleaning fluids that are, in fact, safe enough to drink."

Possible treatments to discuss with your doctor (from Dr. Lisa Nagy):

- Remove yourself from possible causes, i.e. a "sick" house or office. The culprit may be mold, or as unsuspecting as carpeting or fabric softener. A July study from the University of Washington revealed that six top-selling laundry products and air fresheners gave off toxic chemicals — none of which was listed on product labels.
- Decrease your total chemical load. Switch to organic food, filtered air and water.
- Detoxify with the help of intravenous and oral vitamins and supplements, under a doctor's supervision.
- Investigate whether you have specific food or chemical allergies or hormone imbalances and/or insufficiencies.
- Consider treatment in a low-temperature (140 degrees) sauna, under a doctor's supervision.