

Scents and sensitivity

The power of perfumes is another irritant allergy sufferers have to deal with December 6th, 2002

By Wendy Solomon

The Morning Call

Naomi Godown went to see her allergist the other week, the place she goes for treatment against the world's invisible enemies like pollen, dust mites and mold. But Godown ended up running to the other end of Dr. Eric Schenkel's waiting room in a panic to get away from another unseen, but not unsmelled, foe. The culprit? Perfume.

One woman's Eternity can be another person's hell. Godown's temples started to pound and her nose got stuffy when she caught a whiff of a woman's fragrance. The new patient was not aware of the sign that says, "Important. For the comfort of our allergy and asthma patients, please do not wear perfume or cologne when visiting our office."

"I can't stand it," says Godown, 72, of Easton. "It seems like she just poured the perfume on."

Like millions of people, Godown suffers from a sensitivity to fragrance, a problem that can make life a challenge in public settings. They sneeze, wheeze, tear, cough and choke around people who consider it a pleasant and harmless scent.

Perfume may become the new tobacco. And, like the war on smoking, some activists are waging a campaign for the right to have a scent-safe world - in their workplaces, churches, restaurants and even mailboxes.

Irene Malbin, spokeswoman for the Cosmetic, Toiletry and Fragrance Association, says workers' rights to a scent-free environment should not be legislated. "I think it's basically a question of common sense and courtesy. People should be able to work things out in terms of behavior that works for people in the office."

Besides, Malbin says, "There's no medical or scientific evidence that links fragrance to any serious health problems."

Fragrance may be regarded as merely an unpleasant nuisance by some people, such as disgust when a colleague goes a little heavy on the Old Spice or suffering through second-hand perfume while wedged in between heavy users at the symphony.

But for other people, scents can cause severe reactions.

Tearing, sneezing, wheezing, difficulty breathing, itchy eyes, runny nose, dizziness, nausea and vomiting are just some of the symptoms people suffer from airborne fragrance. The reactions

are not considered an allergy, but an irritation or sensitivity, says Dr. Schenkel, director of the Valley Allergy and Asthma Treatment Center in Easton.

"It may sound like a subtle difference, but an allergy involves the body's immune system. Allergies need the genetics to react and for the body to release an allergy chemical like histamine," Schenkel says. Whereas pollen, dust mites and dander are considered allergens, perfumes can be irritants to the mucous membranes.

For most people, airborne substances such as perfume, gasoline or cigarette smoke bypass irritation receptors in the nose, says Dr. Philip Gallagher, a fellow of the American Academy of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology and former president of the Pennsylvania Allergy Society.

But for others, certain smells stimulate irritation receptors in the nose, which are like nerve endings, and trigger a reflex through the involuntary nervous system that can be similar to an allergy, he says.

People with allergies or asthma tend to be more sensitive to perfume and other irritants, he says.

Perfume can trigger a bronchial spasm in some of the 17 million Americans who suffer from asthma or cause a number of reactions, from headaches to upper respiratory problems, in the 50 million allergy sufferers, according to numerous groups from the American Lung Association to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

"It doesn't cause their asthma - it triggers the symptoms of the asthma for a patient who already has the problem," Gallagher notes.

John Williams, regional vice president for the American Lung Association in Bethlehem, says his organization recommends that people with lung disease and their family not wear strong perfume and to avoid it in the general population.

"We recommend to any of our people with asthma to avoid their triggers. It could be tobacco smoke or it could be perfume, but they should leave that environment," Williams says.

Schenkel says perfume sensitivity is an increasingly common problem. "I think more people are wearing perfume and colognes. We're spending more time indoors and the ventilation might not be the greatest; everything is hermetically sealed. I've been in elevators and sat behind someone in a movie theater and gotten a severe headache."

Godown, who suffers from numerous allergies and asthma, first noticed her reaction to perfume when her husband gave her a bottle of Evening in Paris when they were courting in 1946. She finally had to tell him she couldn't wear it, but that didn't prevent her exposure to other's fragrances.

"I used to get headaches so bad I could cry," she says. "I used to work in the housewares section at Laneco and sometimes someone would spray perfume that would drift over. I had to

leave the area or put Vaseline up my nose," she says. If Godown visits a department store, she must cover her nose and mouth with a handkerchief if she ventures near the perfume counters.

In October, a Salt Lake City nurse sued the hospital where she works, claiming her employer violated her civil rights. The nurse said she was made the office laughingstock after she complained that her co-workers' perfumes and colognes made her sick. She says supervisors failed to adequately accommodate her or enforce the hospital's policy prohibiting heavy perfumes.

"Scent is a real problem in the workplace today and we are becoming more and more aware of it as an issue," says Peter Post, co-director of The Emily Post Institute and author of "The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success."

"It needs to be taken seriously. The scent we would wear in social life can have a real negative effect on people who have not chosen to be with us or who have to be with us."

Post suggests employees either tell the offending colleague in a respectful manner or tell a supervisor about the problem. "We're looking to deal with it on a reasonable level. That's really what the goal is here. You have a right to a workplace you are comfortable in and that's not physically making you ill in some way."

Some businesses instituted fragrance policies or have protocol they follow if an employee complains about odors. Lehigh Valley Hospital mandates employees wear some form of deodorant. Their dress code policy reads: "Due to close contact with others, deodorant or antiperspirant shall be worn. A light cologne or perfume is acceptable."

Because it is a health-care facility, LVH respects patients' complaints regarding smells, even traditionally pleasant ones, says Brian Downs, a spokesman. "Maybe you enjoy the smell of coffee; however, if a person comes into a physician's office who is not feeling well, even the smell of coffee might make them sick."

People who suffer from perfume sensitivity may face an uphill battle, particularly in December, traditionally the best-selling month for fragrances. The \$6 billion U.S. fragrance market is the largest in the world, more than triple the size of the next national market, France. And the \$2.2 billion men's fragrance market in the United States is growing, too, according to industry trade journals. The growing popularity of aromatherapy, fragranced candles and bath and body products is continuing to scent the air.

Consumers may start to see more scented ads in magazines and direct mail. The U.S. fragrance industry is trying to appeal not only to the eyes in its advertisements, but to the nose through scented strips or scratch-and-sniff patches. The ads may be effective, because 61 percent of all adults who smelled a scent strip in a magazine in the past three months said they find them somewhat or very helpful when choosing a fragrance, according to a study commissioned by Vertis Direct Marketing Services.

Customers who consider perfumed ads, catalogs and bills an affront to their senses can often request scent-free subscriptions or bills. About 15,000 of The Bon-Ton department store's 600,000 mailings a year to customers are scent-free, says Mary Kerr, spokeswoman.

Some groups are pushing for better labeling of fragrances used in products so that people with sensitivities will be able to identify and avoid their triggers. Some fragrances can contain up to 250 ingredients, according to the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. Several years ago, the Environmental Health Network, an advocacy group based in California, submitted a petition to the Food and Drug Administration to have Eternity eau de parfum by Calvin Klein declared misbranded because of concerns over its ingredients.

The European Union may consider legislation requiring perfume manufacturers to list ingredients on their products, but the industry is balking because of fears that would give away trade secrets.

And U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., plans to reintroduce next year the Safe Notification and Information for Fragrances Act, or SNIFF, co-sponsored by Rep. Chaka Fattah, D-Pa.

The bill would amend legislation to require fragrances containing known toxic substances or allergens to be labeled accordingly. "Congresswoman Schakowsky believes consumers have a right to know what's in these perfumes. Consumers have a right to make informed decisions," says her spokesman Nadeam Elshami.