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Scents & Sensitivity

Consider others before spritzing perfume

BY **KRISTEN HANKLA**
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"A woman who doesn't wear perfume has no future." -Coco Chanel

"Everyone has the right to clean air." -Cecilia Good

Chances are high that Cecilia Good will experience a severe headache today, just as she has every other day this week.

Before it comes on, her vision will become blurry and she'll feel nauseated. Her throat may swell, and she may have an asthma attack.

That's because Good is allergic to fragrances, which she can't escape at her job as a customer service representative.

"It's pretty frustrating," the Charleston resident said. "People don't understand that don't have allergies how it feels not to be able to breathe, or how it makes your head feel when somebody walks by you or puts lotion on. You smell it and then you can't function and it affects your performance ... and then you get fussed at."

It's something Dr. Brian Dantzler, an allergist affiliated with Roper St. Francis Healthcare, sees often: perfume one person donned to feel beautiful making another miserable. He said 40 percent to 50 percent of his patients suffer from fragrance sensitivities. About 5 percent to 10 percent of the general population is affected, and that number is increasing, he says.

In his practice, Allergy Partners of Charleston, a sign asks patients not to wear perfume or cologne. Dantzler said he is seeing similar signs in more and more businesses.

But not all workplaces are as aware of the potential perfume problem.



So Dantzler has contacted his patients' bosses or human resources departments, and has written "letters saying it's for real. This patient is really having significant trouble and if you want an effective worker, you need to enforce rules about fragrance in the workplace."

Symptoms can include nasal congestion, watery nose, sneezing, red or watery eyes, full or popping ears, severe headaches, fullness in the throat, coughing and wheezing.

Sufferers are actually experiencing more of an irritant, not an allergic, effect to fragrances, and most medications used to treat allergies don't help much, Dantzler says. But there are some nasal spray antihistamines that help block irritant effects. He recommends patients use these before going places where fragrances are likely lurking, such as parties or department stores.

He also recommends avoiding fragrances, though he admits that's not easy.

"What's interesting is sometimes it can be such low levels, such few parts per million that you can essentially not smell it, but yet it can still trigger symptoms," Dantzler said.

So what about the perfume lovers of the world? Should others' health issues affect their usage?

Cindy Grosso, founder and president of the Charleston School of Protocol and Etiquette, suggests perfume wearers be respectful of others.

"We just need to be aware that perfume is personal, it is intimate, and not everybody has the same taste," Grosso said. "And so when we apply it in the morning, we need to be aware of that. Not to drench ourselves in it, but to spray it so it's sort of our essence."

She also recommends having two fragrances for different times of day. The day fragrance should be lighter, and the night one can be "pretty much anything you like."

If more than one person comments on your perfume, take note, Grosso says. You may be wearing too much. Also, etiquette suggests not spraying perfume in public.

If your work situation has you seated next to a person with a fragrance sensitivity, Grosso recommends either not wearing perfume or asking to be moved.

"If it's somebody I have to work with, I'm going to pay attention to it," she says. "That's part of being a team."



For the allergic folks, etiquette suggests not confronting strangers about their perfume.

"I'm always leery of saying something to someone where you don't have any relationship ... because they'll get offended," Grosso says.

If you find yourself at the symphony, for instance, seated next to a strongly scented person, it's better to simply move.

Darlene Roberts is the 29-year owner of Good Scents Inc. on North Market Street. When asked if a woman should wear perfume every day, Roberts said, "Oh, Lord! Do you put your underwear on every day? Yes, yes, yes, yes!"

Still, she thinks like Grosso that it's important to be considerate of others.

Some scents are better for certain situations, the fragrance expert said. For example, a particular light and airy essential oil she carries called "Ocean" is popular with nurses.

Fruity scents, such as pear, lemon verbena and grapefruit, also are nice options for those who want lighter smells, Roberts said.

When applying a fragrance, it's important to keep the type in mind, Roberts said. "Perfumes" are the most concentrated and last the longest; "eau de parfums" are the next strongest, and "eau de toilettes" and "colognes" come next.

Because everyone's body chemistry and tastes are different, it's difficult to say how often a fragrance should be reapplied, Roberts said.

She likes her fragrance to be strong enough for others to smell it.

"If you never hear, 'Gosh, you smell good,' then I would want to reapply it," she said. "We all like to smell good."

