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Environmental illnesses are gaining attention, thanks to the 'green' movement

by Angela Townsend for the Plain Dealer Reporter

Exposure to certain toxins found in the environment, such as household mold, could produce symptoms that mimic other illnesses. 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. Going beyond just treating symptoms, environmental medicine is the study of how the reactions we have when we're exposed to certain toxins affect our immune and neuroendocrine (nervous system and hormones) systems. Still, the field is often misunderstood as "alternative" medicine. But with the growing popularity for "green" lifestyles and all things organic, and with illnesses that Louisiana residents displaced by Hurricane Katrina got after living in Federal Emergency Management Agency-provided trailers, environmental medicine is getting more attention. "People just make such a quick judgment about those who are really, really sick," said Dr. Lisa Lavine Nagy, who has been championing for heightened awareness since her own series of misdiagnoses several years ago for what turned out to be severe multiple chemical sensitivity. Often, those quick judgments happen because the people more likely to report their chemical sensitivities are women over age 40, she said. Most "normal" women of that age have mild symptoms that are hard to explain, and thus easier to dismiss, she said.

Experts say that everyone is affected in some way by chemical sensitivity. No one quite knows why, but some think genetics may play a large role. Some people are on the severe end, with their sensitivities so extreme that they can't function in many public places where they can't control their environment. Others may have relatively mild symptoms -- or none at all. The rest are in the middle. Adults suddenly may develop asthma. People may become irritated by certain scents that once went unnoticed. Dr. Nagy, a 1978 Hathaway Brown School grad, practiced medicine in the Los Angeles area until she was too weak to work. Mold in her house, caused by a faulty aquarium, sickened her and her family.

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 of the Cleveland Clinic:

One of the keys -- especially here in Cleveland -- is to air the house out. Over the course of a winter, the quality of inside air becomes worse than outside air, says Dr. Roizen. 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 Dr. 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 study published in July 2009 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.

After three years of misdiagnoses, Dr. Nagy traveled to Texas for testing and treatment at the Environmental Health Center in Dallas. She now lives in Martha's Vineyard, Mass., and is busy raising money for the Preventive and Environmental Health Alliance, which she founded. During a visit to Cleveland last month, Nagy -- still bothered by chemical sensitivity -- delivered a lecture on environmental illness for the Employee Wellness Program at the Cleveland Clinic. She also met with Clinic physicians and medical school faculty. She hopes they will be receptive to an environmental medicine course she intends to create. "Medical residency programs are starting to get interested in integrative medicine," said Nagy, talking about a discipline that combines mainstream medicine with complementary therapies with roots in ancient healing practices. "But they're still scared about the concept of environmental medicine, which is a little further," she said. Dr. Michael Roizen, the Clinic's chief wellness officer, said that while it's widely accepted that some people develop a sensitivity to certain things inside buildings, how many people and the extent to which they are affected is what is controversial. "[Nagy] has one point of view on one end of the spectrum," he said. "There are also people at the other end of the spectrum." As for Roizen, he doesn't hold a definitive opinion because he said there isn't enough data.

The difficulty for clinicians and health-care providers is figuring out how to take that information and help individual people, said Dr. Kathleen Fagan of the Swetland Center for Environmental Health at Case Western Reserve University's School of Medicine. An epidemiologist, she also serves as board president of the Cleveland-based Environmental Health Watch. "We're understanding more about the effects of the environment on genetics, and the fact that people's genetics determine how they will react to environmental exposures," she said. "We still don't know why someone has a very acute reaction to low-level exposure." Fagan sees people all the time who are trying to cope with chemical sensitivities. "One of the things I advise these patients, to reassure patients, is that I [personally] have not seen anyone die of MCS [multiple chemical sensitivity]," she said. But, she added, "It is very uncomfortable and debilitating." And that, for many people, is almost just as bad.