
Preparing for Fall: Reducing Indoor Air Triggers Before Turning on Heating

As the weather turns colder, many of us spend more time indoors. For people living with Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), this shift can bring new challenges. When heating systems are switched on after months of disuse, they can release dust, mould spores, and chemical residues that may trigger symptoms and make you feel unwell.

The good news is that there are practical steps you can take to reduce these risks and make your indoor environment safer. Below are some simple tips to help keep your air cleaner and more comfortable this winter season.

Cleaning Vents, Air Filters, and Air Exchangers

Before turning on your heating system, it's essential to clean your vents, filters, and air exchangers. Over the summer, dust, mould, and chemical residues accumulate, and once the heat is on, these can be released into the air, worsening MCS symptoms.

- **Clean vents and ducts:** Use a vacuum with a hose attachment to gently clean vents and ducts. For a deeper clean, consider hiring a professional to service your system thoroughly.
- **Avoid chemical cleaners:** Many cleaning companies use pesticides, biocides, or anti-microbial sprays in vents to kill pests and mites. These chemicals can linger in the air, trigger SCM symptoms, and remain harmful for a long time. Always ask for a signed statement that no chemicals will be used, and physically check during the cleaning. Choose a green or eco-certified company that guarantees chemical-free vent cleaning.
- **Replace air filters:** Heating system filters capture dust, pollen, and other irritants, but clog over time. Replace them regularly and consider filters with a high MERV (Minimum Efficiency Reporting Value) rating for improved filtration of smaller particles.

- **Vacuum and wash exchanger filters:** Air exchangers (HRV or ERV systems) bring in fresh air, but their filters also collect dust, mould, and chemicals. Vacuum and wash these filters frequently, or replace them as recommended by the manufacturer, to keep the air cleaner.
- **Choose safe air purifiers:** Select purifiers specifically known to be suitable for people with MCS — these should have HEPA filters, be free of plastic parts, and avoid any ionizers or ozone-generating parts.
- **Check technician practices:** Technicians themselves may bring chemical exposures (e.g., fragranced laundry products, colognes). See our guidance on safer practices when hiring tradespersons [here](#).

Low-Emission Heating Options

Older heating systems can circulate dust, mould, and chemical residues throughout the home. If you are especially sensitive, cleaner heating methods may help reduce reactions while still keeping you warm.

- **Electric baseboard heaters:** These systems are typically emission-free, unlike gas-powered heaters.
- **Radiant heating systems:** Radiant floor or wall heating warms without blowing air, limiting dust and allergen circulation.
- **Avoid kerosene or wood-burning heaters:** These introduce smoke, particulates, and chemicals into the air, which can irritate the respiratory system and worsen SCM symptoms.
- **Consult a professional:** If unsure which option is best for your home, seek advice from a qualified heating professional.

Preventing Mould and Dust Buildup

Winter heating changes indoor humidity, which can encourage mould and dust accumulation — both major triggers for people with SCM.

- **Control humidity:** Use dehumidifiers to keep humidity between 30% and 50%, especially in basements, bathrooms, and other damp areas.
- **Seal windows and doors:** Gaps allow in moisture, dust, and allergens. Weatherstripping can help reduce drafts and prevent humidity buildup.
- **Clean surfaces regularly:** Wipe down windowsills, baseboards, and damp-prone areas like kitchens and bathrooms to prevent dust and mould growth.
- **Avoid indoor pollutants:** Do not burn candles, use perfumes, air fresheners, or essential oils. These add volatile chemicals to indoor air and can worsen MCS symptoms.

By combining careful cleaning practices, safer heating options, and good indoor air management, you can reduce triggers and make your home more comfortable during the heating season.