

*Stephen's Healthy Housing Column****Beginning Work on a House with MCS****- Stephen Collette, BBEC, LEED AP*

Stephen Collette is a Certified Building Biology Environmental Consultant (BBEC). This lengthy certification analyses the built environment and how it impacts people's health. Stephen was a natural builder for 5 years specializing in straw bale construction. Stephen has an engineering background and training which enables him to understand the various processes occurring within the home and how they can interact. Applying these skills and knowledge to the standard home and small office enables Your Healthy House to find the reasons for poor indoor air quality and to create solutions to help create your healthy house.

Stephen Collette is a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design - Accredited Professional (LEED AP), which allows Stephen to use the Canada Green Building Council's guidelines and method to ensure a quantitative approach to building green.

Beginning Work on a House with MCS

With materials selected, trades selected and a scope of work outlined, one can feel as ready as possible to actually undertake the work within the home of someone with MCS. This is where the pedal hits the pavement so to speak. The attention to details at this point are as relevant and important as they have been throughout the entire process.

Should I Stay Or Should I Go?

The first question that arises is the need/requirement to stay within the home during the work. For people with MCS, depending on their sensitivities, this may or may not be possible. If you have the choice, you must be able to answer a few questions to determine whether it is worth sticking around during the work. Obviously the first question is whether you can actually carry on a relatively normal life in the house during the work. If the bathroom is out of order for two days, then there is no option. But, if you can putter around in a smaller percentage of the home, then staying can be helpful.

Do you trust the workers enough to leave them alone? This is a tough one, as you've gone through the interview and called references and all of that, so you should theoretically

trust them and should be able to leave them alone to do their work.

That said, the potential for things going wrong and it's impact can be very scary to many with MCS. An option would be to stop by a couple times each day, like at lunch or break time and see how things are going. That way, the contractor knows when to expect you and can have questions ready.

Having a cell phone or other means to get a hold of you if something arises can also be helpful to all involved. Standing over workers all day doesn't really make sense, as it causes stress for the workers. They know what they are doing and need to focus on that. Letting them do their work is as much a respect for their skills as it is for them to respect your MCS needs.

You could also have a consultant stop by and check in, such as a Building Biologist or someone whom you trust that has construction, building, and material knowledge who also understands the MCS issues and can express them to the builder. Anyone onsite representing you could also take digital photos for you to review after the fact. The contractor, if on their own, could also email you photos of questions they have, if you are unable to be onsite during the renovation.

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If you are staying onsite, be sure to monitor how you are feeling and be aware of potential reactions. As stated earlier, one shouldn't hang over the workers, but check in periodically or as they need you. Ensure other exposures, unrelated to the work, are kept to a minimum. If you are having a reaction to something, it helps if you can identify it as accurately as possible so you can try to have things changed by the builders.

Sealing Off and Venting Out

Exposures to the work going on, be it painting, dry walling, installing new windows, or whatever, needs to be isolated from the rest of the house. This reduces dust exposures, and chemical movement as best as possible, to reduce the reactions from the work carried out.

Creating air barriers and containment around the work is crucial to control these issues. Stretch poles or extension poles will hold plastic up at the ceiling and you can tape plastic to the walls and floor with painters tape, giving a decent barrier to control the bulk of the dust and debris. Having a fan in the containment exhausting outside is also a good idea. This will create a negative pressure and put airborne contaminants outside, instead of into the house. Carpet dryers, or air mover fans, are the best for this, as they fit into windows well. If it is the windows being worked on, then a fan inside containment blowing towards the open window will help.

If you are in a cold climate and it happens to be winter, then sealing off the ductwork in the affected area should

be done, to prevent debris or odors getting into the forced air system. This will require that you have space heaters that you can tolerate inside the containment to keep the workers warm and happy.

Depending on your sensitivities and available space, you may have a decontamination chamber between the work being done and the rest of the house. It's a “mud room” or antechamber where workers can change their boots, or clothes so that they are not tracking debris, dust and odors from the work area to the rest of the house. Also, garbage can come and go out through here and be double bagged, if required, to prevent odor issues.

If the MCS is severe, then ideally a separate entrance for the workers would be suggested, where possible. If you are in an apartment or the work allows, containing the work area and a safe path to the door is not a bad idea, as it simply reduces the exposures and contaminants, and makes clean up easier for the workers.



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Removing the Big Concerns

Cutting wood or other materials can be the biggest concern with respect to air quality. Have the work that is the messiest, such as cutting, done outside. This could be done in the contractor’s trailer, an onsite tent for them to use, or out in the open, as long as they are downwind and you are not too sensitive to the items being cut. Be aware that this may make a mess of say, your lawn, but your lawn falls on the lower level of concern than your indoor environmental health. Remember to keep all windows and vents closed during this process.

Kind Words

There will always be the potential for problems within situations like this. Remember to use kind words. You’ve worked hard to find these people and they’ve worked hard to accommodate you and your MCS. Working together in a positive attitude is important.

I was on one jobsite, where the workers were replacing windows in an entire house, a huge undertaking and potential for problems. We contained each area as they replaced the windows, cleaned up afterwards and

moved to the next window. It went quite well, and was a success. The owner of the company bent over backwards for my client. His one employee wore a bit of cologne to the jobsite though, and although he was the one outside on the ladder, my client noticed it a little. So I had a gentle and encouraging word with him about how well the work and containment was going and then mentioned the fact not to wear cologne tomorrow and he didn’t.

Had I got upset, yelled, or done something irrational, they simply could have walked away. It doesn’t build trust in either direction and we need all the MCS aware builders and contractors we can get our hands on. Helping them help us, builds greater understanding of our needs and helps create a group of trusted and respected builders, whom are happy to work with those who need it most.

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