

## Fragrance Free Wedding



When Martine Evensen and Poul Erik Bechmann got married in the King Haakon Church in Copenhagen, Denmark, it was both a typical and unusual wedding: the two hundred guests were virtually fragrance free.

The bride, Martine, has multiple chemical sensitivity, MCS, which makes her sick from exposures to minute amounts of chemicals that are generally considered safe. That makes it very hard to be around people who use scented personal care products and most kinds of laundry products. But when Martine and Poul Erik decided to get married, they wanted a big wedding.

Would it be possible to gather two hundred people in a church and reception room, and then about fifty guests at a restaurant, without the bride getting sick? Two hundred people, from age 5 months to 80 years, from five European countries?

Martine is 47 years old and had never married before. She was about to lose any hope of finding a life partner who would be willing to fully support the life she must live to manage her illness, and whose family would respect her needs. But then she found Poul Erik, who is a little older and a widower. They considered

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having a small private wedding at home, but Martine thought that the first, last and only time she'd marry, she wanted everybody there.

Months of preparations went into the project of ensuring that Martine would have a wedding she could enjoy, without getting sick. They contacted the Danish MCS support group that Martine is a member of and obtained two hundred copies of a folder with clear instructions on how to become safe enough to be around someone with MCS. The folder was sent out together with the invitations, three months before the wedding. The invitation said that the couple had just one large wish: a day with a great party and much happiness. To facilitate that, every guest was asked to come fragrance free, and was thanked in advance for closely reading the accompanying folder. The couple also stated that they did not wish for any wedding presents, but instead listed three humanitarian causes they suggested people donate money to instead. One of the three was the Danish MCS support group.

This educational project was not just for the occasion, but also for the future, when the couple would get together with family and friends on later occasions. It worked very well. Many of the guests called ahead to inquire about hair mousse, dry cleaning and safer cosmetic products. For most of them, it was the first time in their life that they looked at what chemicals they put on themselves every day, and many said they would go without after the wedding too.

Only two of the invited guests decided not to come, due to the fragrance ban. That is a small number out of two hundred.



The groom's brother performed the wedding, so it was easy enough to find a less-toxic minister. The couple had already been to the church's reception area and the restaurant several times, and Martine usually did well there. There was no new furniture and no harsh cleaners were ever used. On the day itself, the church, the reception room and the restaurant were decorated with artificial flowers and fresh leafy tree branches. It was checked that all soaps in the bathrooms were unscented and that there were no fragrance blocks in the urinals. The staff was also checked for fragrances.

The couple had laid a detailed plan for where they would be at all times, so they would always be near an open window or other ventilation, and have some distance to the guests.

The couple entered the church through a side entrance, and skipped the traditional march up the center aisle. They were seated by the altar, instead of in front of the guests. Only the closest family was seated in the first three rows, people whom they knew were 100% safe to be near.

The bridal bouquet consisted of scent-free roses and other flowers, as well as green leaves. The bride only held the bouquet on the way in and out of the church; otherwise it was lying next to her.

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The newlyweds were driven home in a private car by friends they knew to be safe. They decided not to chance the more traditional limousine.



All went as planned, but then things went awry. They had just had their picture taken and were on their way back to the church for the reception, when it started to rain heavily. Instead of running in through the side entrance, they ran through the main entrance, where a lot of guests were standing. The guests of course wanted to hug and kiss the bride, and some of them were not quite safe to be near. When people normally use fragranced products, they do not become really safe from just taking a shower and putting on unscented clothes. The fragrances are still in their skin. Martine reacted to it as if she'd been sniffing solvents and she couldn't think clearly enough to explain what was happening, but she got through it. One can't blame people for wanting to meet the bride.

During the reception, the tables were arranged in a large V-formation, with the newlyweds at the top of the V, and right next to an open window. The tables were arranged to keep the guests from getting close to the bride. The couple had

prepared two welcome speeches. First the groom's traditional welcome, then Martine thanked everybody for doing their best to come unscented. She also said she hoped they could appreciate that she was not able to walk around and thank each of them individually. In that way, it was made clear that further contact wasn't practical.

The wedding dinner was held with 54 guests at a restaurant. It was a great success, with no problems. Both the restaurant, the staff, the bathrooms and all the guests were completely safe. The last symptoms from the exposure at the church entrance left Martine shortly before it was time to dance the bridal waltz.

When Martine and Poul Erik were interviewed five days after their wedding, they looked back at it with fondness. They thought it had been a great success. They were glad they did it, but would not want to repeat such a large event again.



Martine's tips for a successful wedding:

- Inform the guests about MCS well in advance
- Compromise and drop some traditions, such as
  - walking up the center aisle
  - flowers in the church
  - limousine
  - hairdresser
  - hugs and kisses from the guests
  - standing at the gift table
- Create a detailed plan, and stick to it
- Take a couple of days off afterwards – don't go directly on a honeymoon.

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This article is compiled from two articles in *MCSinfo* magazine, written by Joan Grønning. *MCSinfo* is published by MCS Foreningen Danmark ([www.mcsforeningen.dk](http://www.mcsforeningen.dk)), a support group for people with MCS in Denmark. This English-language version was written by Steen Hviid.