

How to survive a visit by the plumber when chemically sensitive



Having a plumber or handyman enter your house and work on the water system carries a high risk of problems for someone with chemical sensitivities (MCS).

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The problem with plumbers

A plumber or handyman will need to enter your home and may need to install new materials or even cut holes in the wall.

Few tradespeople are non-toxic. Many of them pour on cologne or other fragrances to mask any smell of sweat or odors from previous jobs (such as working on sewage lines). It is not realistic to get them to detox themselves before

visiting. Even if they didn't put on any fragrances that day, their clothes and their skin will still be saturated with it. It cannot be washed off.

Then there are the materials they need to use to do their job, such as glues, caulks, pipes, fittings and fixtures. Most of these are benign, but the glues are problematic.

In some cases they need to cut holes in the wall. Then how to repair that without introducing toxic materials?

Handyman or professional?

The first decision is whether to use a handyman or licensed plumber to do the work. A handyman is much cheaper but the quality of the work may not be as good, and in case of real trouble there is no insurance to cover the damages.

Perhaps consider the impact of a shoddy job when making the choice. The impact would be greater if a leak developed in a hidden spot, such as inside a wall, where mold can fester for a long time before being discovered. See Case Story 1 for an example.

Scheduling

Schedule the visit as early in the day as possible. Then there is more daylight and warmth outside to deal with the cleanup afterwards. An early appointment also means the plumber is more likely to actually show up on time, or at all. It is difficult for a plumber to know in advance how long each job will take. Some jobs can take much longer than expected so people scheduled in the afternoon may first get a visit in the evening or another day.

If you need to stay outside during the visit, keep an eye on the weather report and reschedule the day before if necessary. It is rude to cancel the same day as the appointment.

Make it clear that if the plumber has not arrived by a certain time, such as 11 a.m., the visit must be rescheduled.

Plan where to be

Plan ahead of time where you will be while the plumber works. This could be on a porch, in your car or sealed up in a bedroom. Unless you have a helper to deal with the plumber, you will need to be able to be around him somehow for short amounts of time.

Keep things on hand

Consider what materials may be needed for the job. You may need a handy friend to advise you here.

If the plumber may need to use caulk, consider having a tube of aquarium caulk on hand. Regular caulk is so toxic it kills fish in aquariums, hence the need for a special caulk. Some people with MCS report they tolerate aquarium caulk much better than any regular caulk. Just keep in mind that this caulk cost much more than regular caulk and only some hardware stores carry it.



A tube of aquarium caulk.

Another item that may be needed is a drywall door. These are used if the plumber needs to cut a hole in a gypsum drywall to get enough room to work inside the wall. If you have one on hand, the plumber can make the hole to fit the door and then install the door when finished. This may mean there is no need to replace any drywall, which can be a toxic experience.



A drywall door prior to installation. See the Case Story 2 for a picture of it installed.

Drywall doors are available in steel and plastic and are not expensive, but their sizes are limited. If a big hole is needed, consider buying a sheet of drywall and air it out for some months before scheduling the work.

If the plumber may need to cut through a tiled wall, that may mean extensive repairs will be needed afterwards by someone who does tile work. It may be worth it to be prepared for that in advance, including choice of grout material.

Be prepared yourself

Have snacks and plenty of bottled water on hand. The visit may take a lot longer than expected if the plumber needs to go get a part.

Even if you are using filters, you may want to wait a day before drinking filtered tap water again.

Consider covering the floors with plastic to protect the floor, especially where he will be working. If you have a hard surface floor it can be washed afterwards, but

that is not so simple with a carpet. If the plumber is wearing fabric softener, it may rub off.

Consider removing items that can absorb fragrances and smoke particles (from soldering). Examples are towels, clothing and curtains.

Asking for accommodations

An introduction to MCS is often appropriate, but make it brief and simple. Perhaps explain that you are "allergic" to chemical fumes such as fragrances, glues, etc. MCS is not an allergy, but that term is better understood.

It is not realistic to detoxify a contractor. Even if they don't put on their daily cologne, the stench will still come from their clothes and even out of their skin.

Someone has suggested handing them a disposable painter's suit to cover themselves, though this writer is not aware of anyone who has actually tried that approach.

You could ask the plumber to do as much work as possible outside, such as gluing and soldering.

You can also ask that any excess glue be wiped off, to reduce offgassing.

PVC pipe glue

The glues used on PVC pipes are extremely toxic for a short while and then becomes odorless. They are designed to be fast-acting so the pipe can carry water shortly after it is glued. There are no alternatives.

If possible, the gluing should be done outdoors and then wait a few minutes before bringing it inside.

These glues are designed to cure in just a few minutes (at the expense of toxic fumes). Then the pipe can be filled with water again, according to the instructions. Since some of the glue will touch the water, it may be safer to wait a few hours before letting water in these (we have no data, but this seems a reasonable precaution). But then the plumber can not be there to verify there is no leak.

Thread sealer

Most water heaters and faucets are screwed on instead of glued or crimped. In many cases a thread sealer is placed on the thread to make it fully water tight.

A thread sealer is a paste that is typically made of petroleum-based oils, talc and kaolin, with some additives. We contacted a major manufacturer, who stated there were no fungicides in their product.

The thread sealer we tested did not smell strongly and was not a problem when sniffed some hours after it was applied.

An alternative is teflon tape, but we cannot recommend it as it is much more prone to leaks – including leaks starting days later.

Cleaning up

Be prepared to vigorously air out the work area for hours afterwards. This is best done with cross ventilation, where windows are open on both sides of the house or apartment. Fans can help, especially with one directed at the work area and another in an open window.

Case Story 1

A friend needed an upgrade to the water system in his utility room. He hired a handyman to install the new pipes and fittings. The handyman was chosen both because of his lower cost and that he had done work for people with MCS before and was not toxic to be around.

A month later, the friend needed to go away for several weeks. He turned off the power to his well before he left.

Two weeks later a neighbor came to check on the house and discovered the new plumbing had sprung a leak and water had been dripping out on the floor for several days. Even though the well was off there was still water in the pressure tank.

The neighbor mopped up about four gallons (fifteen liters) of water, drained the system and pulled off some of the baseboards so the bottom of the walls could dry faster.

Luckily there was no mold growth. The floors were covered with ceramic tile and the walls were designed to prevent mold damage (using redwood bottom plates and drywall not touching the floor).

Once the owner of the house returned he hired a professional plumber to make the repairs. The plumber said he was not surprised there had been leaks, as the work was done shoddily.

The professional plumber was extremely toxic, including clothes apparently treated with dryer sheets (a common scourge in the USA). My friend dealt with it by only meeting the plumber outside and sealing the utility room off from the rest of the house. Afterwards he mopped the floor and vigorously aired out the room for several hours.

By nightfall everything was fine.

Case Story 2

This author had a shower valve that was wearing out. Less and less hot water came out through the shower head and the faucet.

The valve was a decade old, so I expected it had to be replaced. This would probably involve making a hole in the wall. Fortunately, the back side of the wall was in a pantry and covered with gypsum drywall, so it would not be necessary to break open the tiled wall in the shower.

To prepare for this possible break-in, I purchased a drywall door at the local building supply. It was made of steel and would fit a one-foot (30 centimeter) square hole. That would be much more benign than installing new drywall.

Since the repair was not urgent, I delayed it until the weather was pleasant so I could have the windows open for many hours and sit outside in comfort.

I wanted a real professional job done, as any leakage inside the wall would be terrible. So I hired a large plumbing firm for the job. They promised the plumber would be there no later than 10 a.m.

The plumber was a very pleasant young man, but one of the most toxic people I've ever encountered! I briefly explained my situation and he had served people with MCS before, so he was not surprised that I had to wear a respirator while near him.

He said he could probably just open the front and clean out mineral deposits and be gone in an hour, but it ended up taking five hours. He had to go get a replacement valve and break in through the back wall to get room to work without pulling off the bathroom tile. He then installed the drywall door to cover the hole. He said they didn't do any drywall or tile work so without this door I would have had to hire another contractor to make the repairs with all that entailed. This way it was all done in one day.



The finished work with the drywall door open. It closes flush with the wall and is not an eyesore.

The plumber assembled the pieces outdoors in his van to minimize fumes in the house. He used a thread sealer and took care to wipe off any excess paste. He also crimped two short plastic pipes on the assembly, which he then also crimped onto the pipes in the wall.

He explained this was the most reliable assembly he could do. He considered it better than using soldering or teflon tape, especially when working in a tight space.

Since this would be hidden inside a wall, where leaks are hard to notice, I wanted the best protection against leaks.

I rarely entered the house during his visit and then only while wearing a respirator. The rest of the time I sat on the porch or in another building.

My house is small. I was only able to block off the bedroom from his strong stench. After he left it took a washing of the tile floor and 24 hours of airing out to

make all areas tolerable again. I kept the new access door open with an electric fan blowing in the hole for several hours. It then closed flush with the wall.

I was safe at night in the sealed off bedroom and by noon the next day I could close all the windows. This would have been quite unpleasant during the winter.

More information

Other articles on how to live with MCS, including healthy houses, are available on: www.eiwellspring.org