

FRAGRANCE-FREE FLORALS:

Marc Jacobs glass flowers designed for Waterford Crystal, £90 for three.

Photograph: Elise Dumontet.

Hair: Kenna for Blow.

Make-up: Ayumi Otani.

Model: Sophie Holmes

Scents and sensitivity

An allergy to artificial fragrances is no laughing matter, says sufferer Ariel Leve. Fortunately, manufacturers are at last offering scent-free alternatives

here is a classic situation in the aroma-phobe's handbook. It is 5pm on a Friday and pouring with rain. You find yourself standing on a highly populated street corner in damp jeans with an overstuffed suitcase, frantically trying to hail a cab. Your flight is three hours away and you know there will be at least two hours of traffic out to the airport. Everywhere you look there is someone with an arm raised, just like you, waving to no avail. The stakes are high.

Then, a taxi pulls up inches away to let someone out. You feel, uncharacteristically,

blessed. You climb in, shut the door, inhale.

Seconds later, you're faced with a decision. Miss the plane, or puke. The aroma of fake strawberry and cinnamon from the Magic Tree is so overwhelming that now a gut-wrenching nausea has made you unfit to fly anyway. You ask the driver to pull over, so you can head home and recuperate.

All my life I have been allergic to artificial scents. Not the sort of "official" allergy that has been diagnosed by a physician; but the sort of headache-inducing, dizzying psychological allergy that makes me consider holding my breath until I pass out.

It started when I was a child. My mother

wore the perfume Joy, by Jean Patou: a strong, heady, floral scent. Smells from one's childhood are powerful and recreate emotional memories. Every time there is a trace of Joy in the air it brings back one thing: anxiety.

I would smell my mother coming to hug me, and panic. She would wrap her arms around me in a Joy-soaked embrace, I would wince, and hours later, I'd still have a headache. Naturally, she was confused. Why was I such an unaffectionate child?

Confronted with this, I told her the truth. I couldn't stand the smell of Joy. "I've barely got any on," she said. And thus, my first lesson with scent: people who wear perfume have >

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no idea how strong it smells to others around them. Perhaps this is because after the initial dab, it disappears. On them. But that doesn't mean it's not there.

If you're sensitive to artificial fragrance, everyday life becomes an olfactory challenge. Flying is even more of a risk than usual. There's always the prospect that something will go wrong with the plane or there will be a terrorist threat. But even worse: there is the possibility of an eight-hour flight seated next to someone wearing some hideous scent.

Aroma-sensitive people are in the minority and because of this, we're saddled with a reputation as being difficult, fussy and rude. Try explaining to a flight attendant that you have to move seats because the person next to you is wearing a very strong perfume. They'll look at you as though you've said you can't sit next to someone wearing yellow.

When I've asked friends if they would mind not lighting scented candles when I come over, in my presence they've said: of course. Soon after that, the invitations stop.

And when, once, I enquired at the hair salon if there was any shampoo and conditioner that was fragrance-free, it was not met with a warm reception. I quickly learned that asking a hairdresser to use fragrance-free hair products is like asking a gourmet chef if she wouldn't mind using Spam instead of prosciutto. Not a good idea. Especially since the final result is in their hands.

Even a pleasurable outing like going to the theatre has become angst-ridden. A few years ago, I had taken my seat and just before the play began, a woman sat down next to me reeking of patchouli oil. For all of act one, the play was a blur because I had to focus on breathing through my mouth.

Seven years ago, the city of Halifax in Nova Scotia became the first place in North America to ban cosmetic fragrance in most indoor public places. This meant there would be no hair gel at school, no perfume on buses, no fragrance in libraries or hospitals. The reason behind it was that chemical fragrances are poison and that people suffer as well as the environment. Anti-scent campaigners asserted that this was equal to the hazards of tobacco and pesticides, and cited a syndrome called Multiple Chemical Sensitivity.

A syndrome I hadn't heard about? Too good to be true. Turns out, it was. Few doctors in the US and Canada recognise Multiple

Chemical Sensitivity as a real disease.

Meanwhile the EU is taking matters more seriously. There are plans to limit the use of fragrance in products, as it has been found to be the most common ingredient that causes an adverse reaction. REACH (a body for registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals), the new European chemicals-regulation body, introduced legislation last summer to force manufacturers of chemical products (beauty companies included) to register and declare (and eventually reduce) the chemicals they use, in the interests of health and the environment.

But given that my aroma phobia can't wait for the new rules to take effect, I have searched out as many products as possible

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that are fragrance-free. Apart from looking for the words "fragrance free" on the label, I also checked the ingredients listing at the back of the bottles for the word "parfum", as there are 26 fragrance materials that are potential allergens used in beauty products listed under this name and I was determined to avoid them. I also found out that it's not just the fragrance itself that can cause an allergy, but benzyl alcohol. It has very little scent but is categorised as a fragrance material as it is used as a preservative in perfumed cosmetics, although at concentrations of less than one per cent it is unlikely to cause any reaction. But I'm not the type to take chances.

At my local chemist, there was little to choose from. The one unscented shampoo, Shiny Paw, was for dogs. Though my hair is indeed dry, I don't consider it to be fur. I moved on.

I discovered that the alternative beauty brand Jäsön, sold at Whole Foods and other health-food stores in the organic-products

department, makes an entire fragrance-free beauty range for customers who are allergic to (or worried about) scent in their products. At first, while washing my hair with their shampoo, it felt like something was wrong. I'm so accustomed to having a fruity aroma, it seemed as though I was cleansing my hair with air. But the lack of a fragrance lingering on my hair afterwards was liberating.

I am now addicted to their unscented lotion, which means that, if I were so inclined, I could wear a scent of my choice and moisturiser. As many women know, mixing moisturiser with perfume is sensory overload. Either that or it's a waste: they cancel each other out. My friend Joanna who insists on wearing a rose-scented body balm knows exactly how long to wait

before spraying her perfume. The timing is crucial. And the ratio of lotion to scent? She's honed it to an exact science.

Facialist Katherine Jackson mixes up her own fragrance-free products for use in her treatments – if you want scent she'll add it, but for those averse it's heaven. I've also discovered Bliss Naked Body Butter. This is a heavy-duty crème – the Rolls-Royce of lotions – and it's unscented. They use it in Bliss spas for body treatments just in case a customer might not like the scent of their other body moisturisers.

I like using oils and I thought it would be virtually impossible to find any that are fragrance free but Aveda has an entire scent-free line of skin, hair and body care including an oil. Neal's Yard has a similar range called Baseline. The idea is that you can customise products by infusing the lotions, oils and bath gels with an essence of your choice but they also work well without it. The products have a vague scent of the almond oil, wheat germ >

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and soya oil that they're made from but I don't mind it. I realised that many so called fragrance-free products do actually have a scent (of the ingredients they're made with), but just don't have a fragrance added to them to mask this "natural" odour.

This is the case with the Gorgeous skincare therapy range's fragrance-free line (they also have exactly the same formulations with a choice of two other scents considered to be the most universally appealing – rose or lemon). These products are rich and have no added fragrance to cover up a natural aroma that comes from vitamins, amino acids, peptides and antioxidants. I rather like the smell of antioxidants; it feels like I can smell myself looking younger. I also slightly feel this way about Clinique, one of the original fragrance-free brands. I'm trying their Anti-Redness range currently to treat rosacea and I like the neutral, what I would consider dermatological "unscented" scent.

Finding a fragrance-free hand-and-body-wash was a seminal moment. Because not only am I aroma-phobic, I'm germ-phobic as well. And so washing my hands as often as I do, I needed a hand-soap with precise specifications. It had to come in a pump, and it shouldn't feel gritty or antiseptic. Ecosoapia met all my requirements. An organic hand-and-body wash – I can use it up to 20 times a day with no lingering scent or dry hands.

To my surprise, once I started looking, an entire world of scent-free living opened up. After the initial adjustment, I now can't believe how used to artificial scents I had become.

Deodorant, for instance. The smell of our own body odour has been drilled into our psyche as unacceptable. But is smelling like baby powder that much more desirable? I had assumed an unscented deodorant was out of the question. But it wasn't. Jason unscented deodorant accomplished the impossible: I left the house confident I wouldn't stink. At first, I couldn't figure out what that unfamiliar smell was. Then it hit me: me.

In my quest for fragrance-free living, I learnt that finding unscented products was really not that difficult. Perhaps the most trenchant discovery I made is this: being an aroma-phobe means that natural scents are more noticeable. When the senses are not congested with artificial smells, the real smell of the human body can emerge. This might not always be a good thing, but covering it up with vanilla and patchouli doesn't help. ■



Coffee break

Caffeine-addict Jo Craven has decided to kick her habit. Here, she recalls going cold turkey

A nagging voice in my head is telling me to get a coffee. It's been 13 days and 10 hours since my last hit. Instead of the rush of good health I was expecting, a slew of maladies have afflicted me: irritability, constipation, lassitude, night sweats and a persistent headache that strays into migraine territory towards the end of a busy day. I've tried alleviating the throb in my temples by periodically burying my nose in the bag of Columbian beans that I have stashed in the kitchen cupboard. I realise this seems desperate, but it is the only way to stay sane, although I'm realising sane is a sliding scale and I'm at a different point to when I started my detox.

There have been other more surprising observations arising from my abstinence: I wonder what to do with the time that I used to spend screwing together the espresso machine, heating milk and filling the house with that rich aroma. And what could replace the indulgence of announcing to colleagues that I was "going to get a coffee"? It's a completely accepted office ritual that takes 10 minutes off your working day. And I didn't buy my coffee from the local Starbucks;

instead I made the longer journey to Flat White on Berwick Street, W1, where brewing is an art, the customers reverent, and the results delicious. The thought of their exquisite cappuccinos now elicits an ache of recognition despite the ill-health warnings – liver deterioration, gut irritability and impaired immune response.

I was convinced when I learned that for every cup I drank – often five in a day – I was assaulting my nervous system with up to 500mg of caffeine. On receipt of the stimulant, the brain secretes dopamine, which in turn releases stress hormones and causes the secretion of sugar (leading to unattractive weight gain around the waist), which wakes us up. Then, of course, we crash and start to think about our next coffee. The compulsion for caffeine for those of us on more than five cups a day has been likened to that of the desire for heroin, causing similar irrational impulses. (A friend of mine actually left a New Year's Eve party in rural Sussex when she learnt that there was no coffee in the house because she couldn't bear the idea of waking up without a shot.) Dr Mike McPhillips, a consultant psychiatrist and expert in addiction who works with the Priory Hospital, takes coffee drinking seriously. "Many of my patients suffer from anxiety, panic attacks, depression and insomnia, and I always ask them to abstain from coffee – inevitably their conditions improve." However, my resolve to maintain my detox is eroded when McPhillips confesses he has installed a real bean coffee machine in his office after becoming impatient about joining the queue for the only caffeinated machine in the hospital – that, and I've developed a worrying snacking habit to replace the coffee void. Like any addict, he quickly assures me, he doesn't have a problem and controls his intake by never drinking coffee past midday. Well, if a cup of the hard stuff is OK with him, then it's OK with me.

So a fortnight after the detox I was welcomed back into the fold of Flat White, resolving to view coffee as an added luxury in my life, like a good bar of Green & Blacks chocolate, and not the quick fix it had become. ■