

Hard to escape the silent antagonist

'It's scary,' says woman who suffers from illness caused by exposure to electromagnetic fields

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Sue Parsons can't escape it. Everywhere she goes, it's there. A silent and invisible antagonist that essentially leaves her housebound.

But even there, the reprieve is minimal.

Parsons has been diagnosed with electrohypersensitivity, an illness caused by exposure to electromagnetic fields – any wired or wireless technology or device – with symptoms that mimic chronic fatigue or fibromyalgia.

That means even the most seemingly benign items we've learned not to be able to live without – cordless phones, computers, televisions, microwaves, cellphones, wireless Internet – take their toll on Parsons' physical health, leaving her in pain and in a mental fog.

And even the most seemingly benign activities, like grocery shopping, are exercises in agony. The freezers, lighting, scanners and other customers gabbing on their cellphones, can throw her balance and make her feet feel like lead.

Parsons, who does administrative work in Brock University's Alumni Relations department, has to work from home because all of the electromagnetic fields at the university and the 55 transmitters emitting radiation atop Schmon Tower put her in a daze, caused seizures and left her fatigued. (Brock has recently formed a joint health and safety sub-committee to further investigate potential adverse health effects of exposure to electromagnetic fields).

Parsons has certain spots in her house where she is less affected: the chair on the side of her dining room table farthest from the TV and kitchen; a small corner of her backyard. When she can't get outside, sometimes she'll just turn off the power in her house for a few hours.

"It's scary. It's very scary," Parsons said about her condition. "I actually think I'm lucky in a way. I can feel it. I can get away from it."

But not everyone can, in part because they may not even be aware of what's causing them to feel physically and mentally zapped, she said.

Electromagnetic fields are one of the most pervasive environmental exposures in industrialized countries today, according to a consortium of 14 scientists that recently penned a report on the adequacy of existing public exposure standards.

Their findings: existing regulations across the globe are inadequate to protect against harm from low-intensity, chronic exposures.

The problem is, policy-makers doubt the need for stringent guidelines because of conflicting results of scientific studies on the health effects of exposure to electromagnetic radiation, Parsons explained.

She's even encountered those who doubt her condition.

"There's always people refuting it and saying, 'You're crazy.' They'll get a funny look on their face (when I tell them) like you're a crackpot," Parsons said. "It's almost like I need to carry (my diagnosis) around so people believe me."

As technology advances, though, and, in particular, more cities consider going wireless, Parson fears others will be bombarded with more electromagnetic radiation and, eventually, become as sick as she is.

"Someone told me it's the largest unwilling human experiment ever. It not only affects humans, but affects

nature," Parsons said.

"We need stricter safety standards. We need protection. There's no protection against it."

What is electrohypersensitivity (EHS)?

concentration, problem-solving), Sweden. appliances. It's a phenomenon where individuals experience adverse health effects while using or being in the vicinity of devices emanating electric, magnetic or electromagnetic fields. Symptoms include cognitive dysfunction (memory,

balance, dizziness and vertigo, facial flushing, skin rash, chest pressure, rapid heart rate, depression, anxiety, irritability, frustration, temper, fatigue, poor sleep, body aches, headaches, ringing in the ear, and are consistent with chronic fatigue and fibromyalgia. EHS is classified as a disability in

About two per cent of the population has severe symptoms of EHS and is unable to live in modern society with its electrical and electronic

Another 35 per cent of the population has moderate symptoms represented by an impaired immune system and by chronic illness.

Source: The World Health Organization and Magda Havas

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