

# What it is like to wear a mask everywhere I go

by Misha van Loder

In June 2004 I was diagnosed with chemical sensitivities. Previously I had been having problems with common household and chemical odours affecting my eyes, nose and breathing. Some of the symptoms included very dry eyes, (my eyes had stopped producing tears), my chest was sore, all smells hurt to inhale and breathing through my nose had become very painful. Perfume and diesel were the worst culprits, inhaling any caused me excruciating pain for hours afterwards, while my eyelids would swell up also.

I changed washing powders, personal care products and cleaning products, anything I thought might be the cause. I even tried staying at different locations. I had thrown out nearly everything I owned to get rid of the perfume and washing powder odours that were affecting my health. I was unable to go to shopping centers, public places, schools, any where there was traffic fumes or deodorants, perfumes, fragrance or moulds. I had changed my whole life to avoid being exposed to chemicals and I had become a virtual recluse.

On a visit to my immunologist I picked up a brochure for AESSRA. I joined immediately and soon purchased a 3M carbon filter mask. I then moved away from the city and my partner to find a rental property near the ocean. The idea of wearing a mask into a public place frightened me. I thought I may be ridiculed, laughed at, or looked upon as a freak. The first time I wore the mask I cried in the car. Just before I left to go into the supermarket, I looked at myself in the rear vision mirror and laughed at what I saw. I really could not believe I was doing this.

I took off into the shopping complex, went in to the supermarket and got my groceries. While I was in there I got all these funny stares, some people whispered, giggled or pointed, while others were really

shocked to see someone wearing a mask. This made me feel alienated and embarrassed. But as I walked to my car with my arms full of the things I needed, I realized that I had got what wanted all on my own and also done something I hadn't been able to do in a long time. I felt a sense of deep satisfaction and freedom because I had not gotten exposed and I was symptom free mostly, apart from my eyes being affected by the smell coming from my clothes but this was minimal compared to what happened without the mask.

I have been wearing and using the 3M mask for over two years now. It has become my salvation and has brought me freedom, strength and the



ability to go out into public and do the things that normal people do. Things like shopping, taking my daughter to school, appointments, going to the library, the fruit and vegetable shop and places where there is wood smoke or perfumes and deodorants. I even wear one around my neck when I go for a walk ready to pop on if I need it.

Now the fact that I need to wear a mask doesn't even bother me at all. I actually wear two masks because the outer mask extends the life of the inner mask which in turn protects me well and saves me money. This is necessary as when I am in a place where there is perfume the outer mask absorbs the bulk of it allowing me to reuse the inner mask again.

If there is strong perfume I cannot actually stay very long as the perfume affects my eyes externally from the outside air and it gets on my hair and clothes which then affects me when I take my mask off. I try to avoid places where there is strong perfume in the air. I cannot go anywhere where there is a fragrance emitting device, so most public toilets are out.

I am relaxed and confident about wearing a mask out in public. When little children point and say "Mummy that lady's wearing a mask" I may play peek-a-boo if they are very young or I will say that perfumes affect my health. Some people will ask if I have the flu. Others will ask if the pollen is bad to which I reply, it's actually the perfume, deodorants and smoke. Teenagers still laugh but I don't care. I have even had two different people come up to me and tell me that they used to wear a mask also and that it's not necessary any more because they have now recovered.

At the beginning of this year I began attending a course in Business Administration at TAFE. This would not be possible without my two masks. I asked my doctor for a letter explaining my condition and I asked management to remove the fragrance emitting device in the disabled toilet. I spoke to the teachers and most of the students have been asked to not wear spray deodorants and perfume. This doesn't always work but most days I get to stay and complete my work and on the whole people have been really good. There is also a room I can work in if the air in the main classroom is polluted by perfume or deodorants.

Wearing a mask empowers me to get out and live a fulfilling life. I hope my story inspires others to have the confidence to wear a mask to protect their health and enrich their life.