

Tips for Finding Safer Housing

By George Hughes

One way to start is to write down two lists. On the first, list the four top things you need in safer housing. For example, well water, good food access, lake or ocean nearby or one story. On the second, list the four top things you know you can't have. For example, new carpet, smog, pesticides or mold. Next, rate your current housing against your personal lists. Then get maps and begin talking to as many MCS people as you can find in safer areas. At some point you may want to make a long list of things to avoid, but if you start that way it may be discouraging to you and those trying to help you. Money is a big factor in finding healthy housing and, in my opinion, clean, stable housing should take priority over expensive medical treatment. Even if you make a 90% recovery you will still need a nontoxic roof over your head and a good place to rest and heal.

Should you even try to move? If so, how far away? Here is a question to help answer that question! Is your health deteriorating, stable or improving? If it is stable or improving, be very cautious about moving and retain your current housing until you know you've found something better. If your status is unbearable or getting worse, try to determine how much a move to clean air will help by spending a day, or more, on a mountain or seashore nearby.

Do a lot of research before moving to a different climate or ecosystem. Look up Weather Service statistics and wind patterns. Is the area in chronic drought or flood prone? Is there a sustainable local food supply? Will there be medical, family and community support? Find several MCS people in the region that will honestly discuss the pros and cons of the air quality, climate, etc. No area will be good on all criteria and no area is automatically good for all MCS people. For instance, some people don't tolerate high elevation, dust or desert vegetation. A little altitude may provide cleaner air, but a valley may be more shielded from cell towers and radio frequencies. It's best to test a place morning and night and in different weather conditions. The season of year can make a big difference due to pollen or winter mold die-off. If possible, camp (tent, car, SUV, trailer) in a new region to find the cleanest microclimate before moving there or buying property.

To sum it up: No place is perfect but cleaner air makes a big difference. Clean air is not often a quick cure, so try to find a place where you will be reasonably happy. Not so hot or cold that you will be shut in or unable to garden.

Once you've narrowed your search try to find a realtor to help you search based on your two short lists. You can also search www.greenhomesforsale.com and www.mls.com yourself. Most rentals are in local papers or www.craigslist.com. Develop a network of realtors, landlords and management agencies that know you need to see units before they get new paint, carpet cleaner and air fresheners like

Glade plug-ins, etc. If possible, test and determine ahead of time what kind of paint, sealers, cleaning products and procedures you do tolerate. Ask the manager to let you (or someone you hire) do the cleaning of the vacant unit.

Bare land is often not listed. Talk to developers, land lowers and local gossips in neighborhoods that interest you. County tax assessor offices can provide property owner contact information. Rugged land and high ground often has better air quality, so learn to read county road maps and National Geographic contour maps that show infrastructure. Look for nature preserves and winding rural roads that may lead to your dream house! Avoid pipelines, railroads, industrial areas, airports, etc. You can enter an address in to www.zillow.com or www.google.com/earth to see the exact location and satellite images of the property.

Network with other MCS people. Join support groups that have state-by-state directories including www.ciin.org 406-547-2255 and www.mcsfriends.org 248-301-2283 or join the new MCS Map www.diseasemaps.org/en/multiple-chemical-sensitivity/ internet groups like www.immuneweb.org, www.planetthrive.com or Facebook and blog groups. Also check out www.safetraveldirectory.com and www.reselter.org. Place an ad in Our Toxic Times www.ciin.org 406-547-2255, Canary Times www.mcshealthenviron.org 773-650-1332, or MCS Friends Newsletter 248-301-2283, mcsfriends.org@gmail.com. Or put up fliers at health food stores and E.I. and alternative medicine doctors' offices. There are many local support groups. Call MCS Friends at 248-301-2283 for help finding one.

Be aware that not all houses advertised as “EI safe” or “nontoxic” really are. Always test before you buy or rent. If you need to ask other MCS people for help searching, or for temporary lodging, don't use the word “desperate”. “Urgent need” sounds less scary. Present yourself as professionally as possible. Don't feel bad or burn bridges if people can't help you now. They may be able to later or know someone who can. Meet as many people as you can for advice, talking partners and help so you don't wear out any one person.

Organic farms may be good neighbors and may even have property or housing for rent. For a listing of organic farmers that allow visitors and interns go to www.wwoofusa.org. One way to find sustainable, organic communities is using the directory at www.IC.org. You can place a housing wanted ad in Communities Magazine 434-361-1417. Some of these communities have MCS people in them and are often in cleaner areas.

If you have a Section 8 voucher, HUD is supposed to give search assistance. www.gosection8.com lists rentals that accept HUD vouchers. Disabled people can ask HUD for a higher than normal rent subsidy for housing that meets their needs. For example, a single-family house, hardwood floors or better general air quality. This is called an exception to the payment standard. See PIH notice 2013- 18.

Disabled voucher holders can also apply their Section 8 to a mortgage to buy housing. For more information call 800-955-2232. The Neighborhood Assistance Corporation of America www.naca.com gives low interest loans for single and multifamily units, even to people with bad credit.

If you have trouble “sniffing out” a place, due to exposures on the way there, take a clean towel or scarf sealed in a glass jar. Get the cloth out when you arrive and spend as long as possible to see how you feel. Before leaving, seal up the cloth again. Take it home and leave it in the jar for at least 24 hours. Open it when you're clear of reactions to see how you react to it. Friends may also use this method to help test houses you can't travel to.

If you find a house or property and aren't sure it will work for you, ask yourself these three questions: Is this place likely to improve with time? Can I make do (sleep on the porch, etc.) until it does? How does it compare with where I am now?

To build or to buy? The main reasons to build new housing are to avoid mold, fragrances, and pesticides and to include special features. For example, radiant floor heat, passive solar heat, covered porches, etc. The disadvantages are that the time and cost of building and developing bare land are hard to figure, cooperative builders are hard to find and even good materials may not be tolerable when brand new. It is good idea to build a small “guest house” or “medical cottage” as a test project. It will come in handy long term, too! For the time and effort of building, a lot can be done to existing housing. For example, removing carpet, sealing out drywall or cabinets with foil, aluminum flashing or nontoxic sealant, or adding a safe bedroom. In an existing house, it's good to be clear about what things can and cannot be changed. For example, heating systems can be changed, tight windows can be added and basements can be ventilated.

Resources:

Tiny Green Cabins www.tinygreencabins.com 651-788-6565 They build custom less toxic houses on trailers. They also offer building plans and materials lists for your own project. Many useful articles about healthy housing including alternative heat systems and reducing EMFs can be found <http://www.eiwellspring.org>
MCS Friends www.mcsfriends.org 248-301-2283 Has a list of books about non-toxic construction and healthy housing.

This document is not intended to be medical advice, and neither the author nor MCS Friends can be held liable for the information or advice in this document.

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