

# JAN

Job Accommodation Network

Practical Solutions • Workplace Success

## Effective Accommodation Practices (EAP) Series

### Job Accommodations for People with Electrical Sensitivity

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**ODEP**

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## JAN'S EAP SERIES

### JOB ACCOMMODATIONS FOR PEOPLE WITH ELECTRICAL SENSITIVITY

Electromagnetic sensitivity, also known as electromagnetic hypersensitivity, electrical sensitivity, electro-magnetic sensitivity, and idiopathic environmental illness (IEI), has been difficult for the environmental health and medical communities to define. Individuals with electromagnetic sensitivity may experience various non-specific symptoms including but not limited to fatigue, weakness, neurological issues, immunological issues, gastrointestinal issues, increased irritability, lack of ability to think clearly and quickly, sleep disturbance, overall malaise, and anxiety.

Individuals with electromagnetic sensitivity typically report managing symptoms by avoiding exposure to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) that trigger their symptoms. They often make modifications to their homes and daily routines to minimize exposure through avoidance of EMFs and reduce their overall long term exposure to EMFs. When it is not possible to avoid it, then limiting duration and strength of exposure and use of shielding may also be useful. Based on data from JAN calls, common workplace issues involve exposure to Wi-Fi, cell phones, and computer equipment such as CPUs and monitors.

According to a review of literature by Martin Rösli 2007<sup>1</sup>, a causal relationship between short term exposure to EMFs and elicitation of symptoms has been challenging to substantiate under laboratory conditions. However, population based studies involving longer term exposure have shown correlation between long term exposure and symptoms such as headache, cold hands or feet, and concentration difficulties. Research on this topic is ongoing.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have published guidelines for “safe” levels of human exposure in a publication called, Manual for Measuring Occupational Electric and Magnetic Field Exposures. However, the nature of electromagnetic sensitivity is such that even levels that are deemed safe for the general public can cause trigger symptoms for individuals who are hypersensitive. Individuals affected by electromagnetic sensitivity experience symptoms at far lower levels and therefore may need accommodations in the workplace beyond the safe levels of exposure indicated in the manual.

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<sup>1</sup> Science Direct Environmental Research 107 (2008) 277–287 Radiofrequency electromagnetic field exposure and non-specific symptoms of ill health: A systematic review Martin Rösli Institute of Social and Preventive Medicine, Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, University of Bern, Finkenhubelweg 11, CH-3012 Bern, Switzerland Received 21 September 2007; received in revised form 4 February 2008; accepted 6 February 2008 Available online 21 March 2008 Retrieved 2/12/2015

Organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United States Access Board, which offers technical assistance on the ADA Accessibility Guidelines, have issued statements and regulatory guidelines related to electrical sensitivity. The World Health Organization (WHO) held an international workshop on the issue in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2004. WHO recognizes that a significant number of people report symptoms after exposure to electromagnetic radiation that range from neurological and immunological to gastrointestinal issues (WHO, 2005). The Access Board addressed electromagnetic sensitivities as part of the IEQ Indoor Environmental Quality Project.

The following is a quick overview of some of the job accommodations that might be useful for people with electrical sensitivity. For a more in depth discussion, access JAN's publications at <http://AskJAN.org/media/atoz.htm>. To discuss an accommodation situation with a consultant, contact JAN directly.

### **General Accommodation Considerations**

- Allow communication via typewriter or handwritten notes rather than via computer or cover the computer with Plexiglas or other shielding material.
- Provide headset/handset extenders or alternate headsets to lengthen the distance between devices that trigger symptoms and the employee's body.
- Change the employee's shift to allow for less exposure to others' devices.
- Relocate workplace away from areas where symptoms are triggered. This may include limiting certain types of devices in the vicinity of the employee's workstation.
- Allow telework (Note: regarding work at home, unless the employee wants to work at home, other options should be explored first to keep the employee in the workplace).
- Allow the employee to meet with others in areas where triggers are minimized or allow remote access to meetings or activities that must take place in areas that trigger symptoms.
- Provide wired telephones and network connections.
- Provide building-wide and/or workspace shielding of equipment and devices, for example add filters to fluorescent lights and tape electrical cords.
- Individuals with electrical sensitivity may also experience limitations from fragrance sensitivity and/or photosensitivity.

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