

The woman who needs a veil of protection from modern life

By VICTORIA MOORE - [More by this author »](#) 27th April 2007

No, she's NOT a beekeeper. This woman believes that her bizarre headgear can save her from the dangerous electrosmog all around us. Can she possibly be right?

Before knocking on Sarah Dacre's door, I take the precaution of checking my mobile phone. It's switched off, as she has requested.

"Last time someone came to visit," she warns, "I started feeling awfully nauseous. It turned out he had a picture phone with him and had left it switched on. *A picture phone!*"

She pauses, looking genuinely horrified. Apparently, this type of mobile automatically sends signals to a local base station every nine minutes - "No wonder I felt so sick."

We sit down in the living-room of the airy, north London house that, for the past two years, has been Sarah's refuge from modern life. Save for the absence of a television, it looks ordinary enough.

But beneath the coats of magnolia paint, she points out, the walls are lined with a special paper that contains a layer of tin-foil; and upstairs, the windows are hung with a fine, silvery gauze.

These aren't idiosyncratic decorating decisions, though. All these silvery layers are here for a purpose: to keep the 21st century at bay.

Sarah, 51, is one of a growing band of people who claim to be experiencing extreme - and incapacitating - sensitivity to electrical appliances, as well as to certain frequencies of electromagnetic waves.

"Wi-Fi, or wireless broadband networks, seem to be the worst thing," she says.

"Closely followed by mobile phones - particularly if they're being used in an enclosed space - the base stations of cordless telephones and mobile phone masts.

"I have to restrict the amount of time I spend on the computer or watching television, and make sure I don't have too many household appliances on at once, because that sets me off as well."

This may sound bizarre, but there is no doubt that Sarah's symptoms are real.

To date, they include hair loss, sickness, high blood-pressure, digestive and memory problems, severe headaches and dizziness.

They strike with such ferocity that, since diagnosing herself as "electrically sensitive" in May 2005, she has been marooned at home.

She can't work. When she wants to phone friends, she has to use a land-line - a significant advancement, it turns out, because she was so ill at one stage, she says, that she couldn't even touch an ordinary receiver without feeling a violent shock pass up her arm.



Veiled: Sarah Dacre keeps the 21st century at bay

Food shopping is done as rapidly as possible, once a week, at a time carefully chosen to avoid younger people and their permanently switched-on mobile phones.

And she can venture into built-up areas only if she is swathed in a net-and-hat ensemble made from a special "shielding fabric" that makes her look like a bee-keeper.

"I'm sure people laugh," she says, "but I don't mind as long as it keeps me well."

Finding her own solutions - however outwardly bizarre - has been essential because, for the moment at least, the medical establishment does not even accept that her condition exists.

Fortunately, some individual doctors have been sympathetic to her plight.

Dr Sarah Myhill, who is registered with the General Medical Council and practises privately in Wales, says: "There is no doubt that electrical sensitivity is a real phenomenon - I have seen too many people affected by electro-magnetic radiation (EMR) to think otherwise.

"Clinically, I nearly always see electrical sensitivity in people who are already suffering from chemical sensitivity.

"There are many symptoms that can be switched on by electrical sensitivity, and it appears that almost any electro-magnetic frequency can be the cause."

Even so, I cannot help feeling a little sceptical. Is there any suggestion that ES could be a psychosomatic illness, I ask Sarah (who, in fairness, does not seem to be particularly highly-strung).

"Inevitably, people suggest that," she says, with a flick of her auburn, Farrah Fawcett-style hair.

"But at one time, ME sufferers were accused of having psychosomatic symptoms and were ignored as a result. Now, the illness is formally recognised.

"Before this, I'd barely had a day ill in my life - I've always been a very energetic, dynamic person.

"I had a career in banking, then in events management, and then I ran my own television production company.

I was always busy and I was always out doing things - skiing, tango lessons, looking after my son, Josh, who's now 17. I had a very active life and I loved it.

"Now, I have no income because I can't work and I have no choice but to devote all my energies to fighting to find out more about my allergies."

The first symptoms started about five years ago. At first, Sarah ignored them, hoping they might be due to tiredness or stress and would simply go away.

Gradually, though, her condition deteriorated. And about two years ago, she says "everything hit at once, like a car crash. As well as the exhaustion and nausea, I even lost the sight in my right eye."

A stream of doctors, complementary practitioners and Chinese herbalists all failed to alleviate any of her symptoms or come up with a diagnosis.

Instead, she found an answer on Google - through websites such as electrosensitivity.org.uk.

All her symptoms seemed to match those of people who believe they are allergic to modern life.

She lists some of the offending items that were in her home: "I had a burglar alarm emitting microwave radiation, I used a mobile phone constantly, I had two cordless phones and countless appliances - all of which have an electromagnetic field associated with them."

Convinced that she had almost certainly found the cause of her illness, she ordered, from the internet, some special rolls of foil wallpaper and a fabric called Swiss bobbinet - a netting made from polyester filaments dipped in silver.

Both promised to "shield" her from any emissions from phone masts or wireless broadband systems.

Within a few weeks of the wallpaper going up and the windows being hung with netting, she began to feel better.

So much so that when she suddenly had an offer on her house, which she had been desperate to sell for seven months, she decided not to sell after all.

Since then, she has gradually managed to find other ways to help her cope.

She can use her computer for up to three hours a day, "but only if I keep myself absolutely detoxed all the time, drinking plenty of water and revolving my meals so that I don't become sensitive to certain types of food as well."

Her long-term (some would say long-suffering) boyfriend, Rod, a gold and silversmith who lives in Kent, has been sympathetic, she says. But there have been unexpected setbacks that might test the happiest of couples.

Last month, she had a relapse and started to panic.

"I'd been feeling quite bright and energetic; then suddenly, for three nights, I couldn't sleep," she says.

"I really felt it was back to how it was in the beginning, when I didn't know what was wrong with me. I was exhausted, developed bladder problems, felt ill. That's when I decided to run some tests."

Using an "electrosmog detector" - the name given to a device that can apparently register levels of electromagnetic activity - she checked her bedroom.

"And there was radiation streaming in through the one wall that I thought I hadn't needed to protect. We have some new neighbours, and I think they must have installed wireless broadband."

To ensure a good night's sleep, Sarah now takes the precaution of swathing herself in her special silver netting.

She is concerned by the increasing spread of wireless networks.

"I think it's a terrible mistake," she says. "Is Wi-Fi going to turn out to be the tobacco, asbestos or Thalidomide of the 21st century? It's looking that way.

"And instead of testing it out properly, what are we doing? We're putting it into schools, exposing small children to it all day long, and opening up entire Wi-Fi areas - they've just created a giant new Wi-Fi zone in the City of London.

"It horrifies me to think of people in small houses or flats who might be affected by several overlapping wireless networks at once."

Yet the scientific case for electrosensitivity (ES) is threadbare. The World Health Organisation's position is that "there is no scientific basis to link ES symptoms to EMR exposure.

"Further, ES is not a medical diagnosis, nor is it clear that it represents a single medical problem."

This week, Professor David Coggan, a member of the Health Protection Agency's advisory group on non-ionising radiation, told BBC's Newsnight: "There is quite a lot of evidence now accumulated on mobile phones and health - and the balance of evidence overall doesn't point to problems.

"There's still uncertainty and there still needs to be further research, but so far we don't have a concern.

"And on that basis, the concern about Wi-Fi is much lower on the scale than, say, that about pan-global influenza."

Other research has backed the view of the medical and scientific establishment.

In one "provocation" study, a number of people who claimed to have electrical sensitivity were placed in a room with a mobile phone and not told whether or not it was switched on.

Asked by a researcher how they felt, they failed to establish any link between physical symptoms and the alleged trigger.

Sarah Dacre believes that this is because the tests were carried out in an area with high background electrosmog.

"Once you are sensitised," she says, "that's it.

"It's like having a glass of wine - it's cumulative in your system.

"You don't stop being drunk once you have finished drinking, so you can't then be tested sober."

She continues to campaign for electrosensitivity to be recognised as a valid medical complaint linked to electromagnetic fields.

"While I'm up and about," she says a little sadly, "I'm going to do something about it."