

# Disability awareness

## Multiple Sclerosis

### What is it?

**Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a chronic disease that affects the central nervous system – brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. It is thought to be an auto-immune illness in which the immune system mistakenly attacks the coating of the nerves disrupting messages throughout the nervous system. Therefore, it can affect vision, arm or leg movement, sensation or balance.**

It's a lifelong condition that can sometimes cause serious disability, although it can be mild and in many cases the symptoms can be treated. It's estimated that there are more than 100,000 people diagnosed with MS in the UK. It is most commonly diagnosed in people in their twenties and thirties, although it can develop at any age, and is about two to three times more common in women than men.

There are different types of MS, and no two people are affected in the same way. This makes it impossible to predict the symptoms someone will have, or the order in which they may have them. While some symptoms, such as fatigue, balance and sensory problems are more common than others, most people will only have a few – and it's unlikely that anyone will have all of them.

### Types of Multiple Sclerosis

#### ⦿ Relapsing remitting

80-85 per cent of individuals start with this form of MS. They experience an attack of symptoms, known as a relapse, which can last for days, weeks or possibly even months. This will be followed by a period of remission, when symptoms improve or go away completely. These periods of remission can last for many months or years.

#### ⦿ Secondary progressive

In this type of MS, symptoms gradually worsen over time without obvious attacks. Some people continue to have infrequent relapses during this stage. In MS, two things can lead to a build-up of disability - incomplete recovery from relapses and/or a gradual progression of the condition. It is estimated that between 50 and 65 per cent of people with relapsing remitting MS will develop secondary progressive MS within 15-20 years, and the risk of this happening increases the longer you have the condition.

#### ⦿ Primary progressive

Around 10-15 per cent of people are diagnosed with this type where their symptoms gradually worsen and accumulate over several years, and there are no periods of remission, though people often have periods where their condition appears to stabilise.

### Symptoms

MS is variable. No two people experience MS in exactly the same way. Many people experience only a few symptoms and it is unlikely that anyone will develop them all. People can have different symptoms at different times – although some are very common, there is no typical pattern that applies to everyone.

MS is unpredictable. Symptoms may come and go, vary in duration and intensity, stabilise or improve. One set of symptoms may be replaced by another. During periods of remission, it may seem as though the person with MS has no illness at all.

**The main symptoms include:**

**Extreme fatigue:**

- ⦿ An overwhelming sense of exhaustion, making it difficult to carry out even simple day-to-day tasks
- ⦿ Made worse by hot weather, lack of sleep, too much exertion or physical illness
- ⦿ Can have a major impact on day-to-day life including mood, relationships and work.

### **Vision problems such as:**

- ⦿ Blurred or double vision, or pain in the eyes
- ⦿ Temporary loss of sight in one or both eyes
- ⦿ Visual disturbances eg. flashes of light
- ⦿ Involuntary eye movements so things appear to be jumping around.

### **Muscle weakness, stiffness and spasms:**

- ⦿ Loss of muscle strength and dexterity or even paralysis of a part of the body
- ⦿ Muscles can contract tightly and painfully, known as a spasm
- ⦿ Muscles can become stiff and resistant to movement, known as spasticity
- ⦿ Can affect ability to walk, carry out personal care and also disturb an individual's sleep.

### **Difficulty with movement balance and coordination including:**

- ⦿ Clumsiness, and/or difficulty with balance and coordination
- ⦿ Shaking of the limbs (tremor)
- ⦿ Dizziness and vertigo, making it feel as though everything around you is spinning
- ⦿ Uneven gait and appearing to lean or stumble when walking and also disturb an individual's sleep.

### **Changes in sensation:**

- ⦿ Numbness or tingling, most commonly felt in hands or feet
- ⦿ Can also be electric shocks, burning, 'ants crawling under the skin' or pins and needles
- ⦿ Some people feel body parts are swollen or enlarged or a tightening band around their chest
- ⦿ Being unaware of temperature – hot or cold.

### **Pain sometimes mild, sometimes severe:**

- ⦿ Neuropathic pain caused by damage to the nervous system, including stabbing pains, feeling of burning or squeezing. Some spasms can be very painful too
- ⦿ Back, neck and joint pain can be indirectly caused by movement problems putting pressure on their lower back or hips.

### **Problems controlling the bladder and bowel:**

- ⦿ Bladder problems, such as having to pee more frequently, difficulty emptying the bladder completely, having to get up frequently during the night to pee and/or recurrent urinary tract infections
- ⦿ Bowel problems – constipation is the most common problem.

### **Anxiety, depression or mood swings:**

- ⦿ Many people experience periods of depression, whether caused directly by MS, or as a result of living with a long-term condition, or both
- ⦿ Anxiety can also be a problem perhaps because of the unpredictable nature of MS
- ⦿ In rare cases, people with MS can experience rapid and severe mood swings.

### **Cognitive changes such as problems with thinking, learning and planning:**

- ⦿ Problems learning and remembering new things, affecting short-term rather than long-term memory
- ⦿ Slower processing of information and struggling to multitask
- ⦿ Difficulty with planning and problem solving, knowing what they want to do but not how to do it
- ⦿ Shorter attention span
- ⦿ Problems with understanding and processing visual information, such as reading a map
- ⦿ Difficulty with reasoning, such as mathematical laws or solving puzzles.

### **Speech problems including:**

- ⦿ Slurring and/or slowing of speech
- ⦿ Changes in pitch or tone
- ⦿ Getting stuck on words
- ⦿ Some people also have difficulty chewing or swallowing at some point.

**Remember MS is a very individual condition:** no two people are affected in the same way. The symptoms someone has will depend on which parts of their brain and spinal cord are affected.

## **Contact us:**

If you would like further information on how we can help you, please get in touch with us:  
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