What Is the MS Hug and How Do You Treat It?

by ERICA WILSON

The MS Hug: Give Me a Hug... Or Not

Hugs are my favorite. I love giving hugs and getting hugs--especially the sweet, tight, full-of-love hugs from my kids and grandkids. They're so warm and welcoming, I just want to hold on forever. But one hug I do not like to receive is the hug that multiple sclerosis (MS) likes to give. It is tight, but definitely not sweet or full of any kind of love. Any time MS has hugged me, it has caused me nothing but grief.

What Is the MS Hug?

The MS hug is a misnomer if I have ever heard one. It is actually a collection of muscle spasms that wraps around different parts of your body. Sometimes it chooses your chest. Other times it wraps around your hips or your waist. It's like meeting someone who likes to hug but doesn't realize they hug too hard. And when you try to pull away, they hug tighter.

What Does the MS Hug Feel Like?

It sneaks up on you while you are watching your favorite show. It may start off as a little tingle, and when you adjust a little to get comfortable, it goes in for the kill. Crushing, taking your breath, squeezing like it will never let go. No, MS, you can keep your hug. I don't want it. It hurts and I have enough pain in my life.

It feels different for each person. It's even different every time I have been unfortunate enough to garner its affection. I have felt it in my chest, which for me felt a lot like pleurisy on steroids.

Tips for Managing MS Hug Symptoms

If you're experiencing the symptoms of an MS hug, below are two options you can try for almost immediate relief.

Try Pain Medication

I really don't like taking medicine. When I finally do break down and consume, it is because the pain is unbearable. I have taken baclofen, gabapentin and ibuprofen, but they only ease the attack. I usually have to just be still and let it run its course.

I am a fighter, but sometimes, the harder I fight, the harder MS fights back, and so, with great aplomb, I surrender. In my case, the attacks themselves don't last long, but they return, unbidden until they tire of my misery.

Use a TENS Unit

Who remembers Schoolhouse Rock? I waited with bated breath every Saturday for Schoolhouse Rocky to burst on the scene (literally, he burst through a brick wall) and teach me wonderful things about English, language,

science and other exciting subjects through very cool songs. All of them were my favorites, but the electricity song is perfect for this segment.

My handy go-to for any of my random ailments is my TENS unit. I stick four pads laced with electrical wires on my skin wherever I feel pain and very tiny electrical shocks work to redirect the nerve pain. You control the amount of electricity delivered and you set where it goes (back, shoulder, etc). It is one of the best investments I have ever made. The unit is around $40 and comes with the pads. I get replacement pads online and it's delivered right to my door. You can get 30 uses out of each one.

Can I Prevent MS from Hugging Me?

While most symptoms of MS are random and for the most part, unpreventable, there are some things you can do to ward them off as long as possible.

- Stay cool – not only like “the Fonz”, but also keep your body temperature down. We all know that being overheated triggers all sorts of MS maladies.
- Rest. I have come to realize that as simple as it sounds, resting really does help to relieve and hold off many symptoms. Especially those times when you feel great, like you can conquer the world, don’t overdo. Take small breaks. Rest.
- And the thing we hear most often and is usually the most difficult, try not to stress. Between deciding whether to keep working or apply for disability, wondering each morning what MS will bless us with, why symptoms are increasing even if the disease is stable, remaining stress-free is laughable, albeit, necessary.

What Else Can I Do?

When you have done everything you can do and the pain still finds you, there are medications (which, personally, I try to avoid at all costs, but end up having to take) that can help.

- I mentioned before that I take baclofen which is a muscle relaxant that really helps my spasticity and leg pain. It has also helped when I get the hug.
- Another one I have tried is gabapentin. This is actually an anticonvulsant that has been shown to relieve nerve pain. It may take a while to find the correct dose, but it may be worth a try.
- An antidepressant called amitriptyline is used to help you get to the deep, sleep that is necessary for your body to heal itself. I have never tried it, but your physician can help you decide if it is right for you.

Some Natural or Alternative Ways to Manage MS Hug Symptoms

I have discovered some great relief tactics recently and even if it doesn’t completely stop the pain, it definitely eases it and makes me more comfortable.

- Bath bombs are (pun intended) the bomb! The fizzy, lovely-smelling spheres of love are relaxing, and if you have jets in your tub, you can float away to pain-free bliss, if only for a few moments.
- I also have a copper compression belt for lower back pain that when wrapped around me, seems to cancel out the pain of the MS hug. It’s like it confuses the nerves that are causing the pain and makes them take a seat. I found mine at Walgreens for around $20.
- You may also try meditation and other relaxation techniques. Maybe some yoga stretches or some other mild stretches that will help to alleviate the pain associated with the hug.

I always say, “Stay positive.” It doesn’t mean you have to be happy all the time, but finding the good as often as you can really does make a difference.