Helpful MS Assistive Devices

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Choosing the Right Devices for a Better Lifestyle

MS is typically a progressive disease, but it doesn't have to swallow up your active, independent lifestyle. In fact, there are plenty of ways to help your body and mind cope with common MS symptoms, although that can be a challenge in itself: with hundreds of comfort and mobility devices to choose from, you may not know where to begin.

Getting to know how your symptoms affect your movements is a good starting point, and then you can take some tips to ease your stress and prevent more serious problems with the right types of MS assistive devices.

How MS Symptoms Work Against Mobility

As the disease progresses, both physical and emotional side effects will tend to interfere with your normal activity – which can have far-reaching consequences on your energy and longevity. And once your walking, coordination, vision, and motivation for exercise are compromised, your will begin to lose your independence. Be mindful of these MS symptoms that can threaten your mobility:

- Dizziness and vertigo
- Numbness
- Muscle weakness
- Fatigue

These symptoms may take a toll on your gait or your confidence as soon as they appear, but in many cases they grow gradually worse, and you may not realize their impact until you have a serious accident. So in order to stay one step ahead of your MS, it's important to watch for new symptoms, but also monitor how your current symptoms are progressing.

Focus on Your Feet

Although MS can affect your mobility in a number of ways, a lot rests on your feet. After all, how you step, stabilize, and propel yourself forward will determine how much you can do in one day, and how well you can do it.

If you suffer from numbness or tingling in your extremities, you may find that you're dragging one foot or scraping your toes as you walk. This can leave you prone to trips and falls, plus it can encourage a muscle imbalance in your hips (which brings a whole new set of medical issues).

- **Orthotics**. Custom-designed inserts for your feet will provide better stability and cushioning. They are contoured to fit your unique foot shape, and the support can help to counter spasticity and fatigue that interferes with your regular gait.
- **Braces**. MS can weaken muscles in the legs, ankles and feet, which will make it much more difficult to

step up, support your body, or move quickly. Leg braces that hug your ankles can give you the stability you need to stand up from seated and climb stairs.

- **Better shoes**. There are a few key features that will undoubtedly help your mobility with MS. Look for a lightweight shoe with lighter tread, a broad base, and sturdy Velcro or elastic shoelaces that allow for a tight fit. Stick with a low heel, and make sure it supports all around – pass on clog, slip-on, and sling back styles.
- **Walking aids**. When your symptoms begin to affect your stride severely, consider getting a walking aid. A simple cane can help you take the worry and pressure out of daily tasks, and there are different models for different degrees of stability. Be sure to visit with your physiotherapist to learn how to use your cane properly.

Next page: adapting everyday equipment to help with daily living.

Adapting Everyday Equipment

Walking around comfortably is just one aspect of your lifestyle; your MS symptoms will probably affect other parts of your daily routine, as well. Find ways to improve three important requirements of daily living – mobility, manipulation, and self-care.

Just Add Wheels

It's a simple upgrade that can make a huge impact on comfort and energy. Wheels on a walker can help ease resistance, but wheeled carts, tables, and chairs can also help a lot around the home. You can likely add wheels to existing furniture with the help of a handy friend.

Wheelchairs aren't just devices for the disabled – they are great tools for rest and recovery when you're suffering from an MS attack. You may want to consider getting one for yourself (they are often covered by insurance): models that fold up will fit nicely in the trunk of a car, and you'll be happy you have it on days when you're feeling particularly tired, or stretch yourself more than you anticipated.

Get a Grip

There are a number of devices to help you manipulate (grip, pull, and handle) items, though some are more helpful than others. Many patients with muscle spasticity and stiffness struggle the most with small, fiddly movements: buttoning shirts, pulling on socks and shoes, or pinching an object. In turn, some of the best tools are those with long arms and well-designed ends, like:

- Flexible, fabric-covered sock pulls (unless you struggle with swollen feet, in which case rigid plastic models may be more helpful)
- Long-handled shoe horns with comfortable grips
- Buttonhooks with a narrow tip, which can also be used to pull zippers
- Thick, spongy covers for handles of utensils and writing tools

If you find it difficult to keep your balance while reaching out, find a reaching stick that can be adjusted, but make sure that it's also easy to manoeuver in your hand. Test a few devices out in the store before you buy – the most comfortable device for someone else may not be the most comfortable for you.

Clever Changes for Better Hygiene

If you're going to invest money and energy into outfitting any space in your home, make it your bathroom. Not only do you spend a significant amount of time in here, but toilet, bath and shower facilities are notoriously difficult to manage when your strength is failing you, or your balance is off. A few small renovations can save you a lot of headache:

- Replace your show head with an easy-to-reach handheld model
- Attach an elevated toilet seat with arm rests, which makes it much easier to sit and stand
- Install grab bars onto the bathroom walls wherever you need them most
- Fix a transfer bench onto the side of your bathtub, to help you move in and out more easily

It’s a good idea to speak with an occupational therapist if you haven’t already done so. They will be able to tell you what changes will bring the greatest benefit, and could have some clever tips to make certain products more useful.

Tackle Cognitive Trouble with Technology

Memory loss is one of the most common MS symptoms, and although it may not be physically painful, it can wreak havoc on your daily life. Note taking is helpful, but if you want to get a handle on your thoughts and obligations, make good use of your phone.

There are a number of apps for smartphones that are designed to help you remember, and relay, important information. This can help you stay on schedule, but it can also be of enormous value in a medical emergency, when stress makes it especially difficult to recall and relate information.

Add the In Case of Emergency app (ICE app) to your phone to keep all your emergency contact info in one easy-to-access place, and consider adding other helpful apps like MediSafe (a service that reminds you which pills to take and when), MyCarLocator (if you tend to forget where you’re parked), or one of the many shopping list apps to keep you on track.