MS Gender Differences

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Is MS Different in Men and Women?

As a woman with multiple sclerosis it's fairly easy to imagine what living with MS is like for other women, but not so easy to put myself in the shoes of a male sufferer.

MS is 2-3 times more common in women than men. Onset in men tends to be later in life and is more likely to be primary progressive. The prognosis is usually better for women, although no one seems to know why.

However, when I talk to men who have MS, both online and in person, there don't seem to be any differences in our experiences at all. I recognize and identify with tales of crippling fatigue, bladder malfunction, mobility and balance problems.

That said, there some obvious differences between the sexes that have an impact on our MS experiences.

Pregnancy

Most women are diagnosed with MS in their 20s and 30s, at just the age when many are starting to think about having children.

It's a cruel blow, but relapses are actually greatly reduced during pregnancy, especially in the third trimester. They think this has something to do with hormones and the body acting as a protective force during pregnancy.

The relapses come back even stronger after the birth though, which I can testify to. I was diagnosed just after my first baby was born and I had several strong relapses soon after diagnosis.

I started Injecting Avonex at this point and my MS remained stable until after I had my second baby a few years later. After her birth my balance was affected and walking became impossible without the use of two sticks.

I wonder if having my second baby ultimately caused my worsening disability or if it would have been as bad anyway. I wouldn't be without her now obviously, but I can't help wondering.

Luckily MS has no effect on how women get pregnant or carry a baby, and the birth isn't affected either. I was beside myself with worry about the birth of my second baby because I knew I had MS so I was terrified something would go wrong.

"Your body will do its thing, don't worry," my midwife told me, and she was right.

Next page: menstrual cycles and sexual dysfunction.

Menstrual Cycles

After living with MS for a few years I started to notice a pattern in when my good and bad days could be expected. A week before my period was due my symptoms would get worse and worse until day two of my period when they would miraculously improve!

It was incredible how different I felt, so I started to investigate. Apparently changes in hormones and body temperature during a woman's cycle can cause dramatic fluctuations in symptoms. I was advised to try the pill or have a coil fitted, which has dramatically reduced these fluctuations. Another "women only" MS problem caused by demon hormones!

Sexual Dysfunction

This is where the women get their own back. Around 70% of men with MS experience erectile problems caused by MS-related nerve damage.

Sexual arousal, response and orgasm require messages to be sent between the brain and sexual organs via the spinal cord so if any damage has occurred along the way the result will be catastrophic for sexual function.

There are ways of treating erectile problems, like Viagra for example, but there are no ways of helping with ejaculation and this can have an impact on men with MS being able to father children naturally.

Women have sexual problems too, but mainly with loss of sensation and the inability to have an orgasm. While this can make the experience less pleasurable it doesn't interfere with her ability to get pregnant and carry a healthy baby full term.

This is arguably the point of our existence, so messing with a man's ability to perform in this way can be heartbreaking.

Conclusion

So, women get MS more often than men, but when men do get it they get it later and they get it far worse. I wonder if this is true though – do men just get "Man MS" like they get "Man Flu?"

Just kidding. I know women and men experience MS in much the same way. When it comes down to it, we have the same bodies and they malfunction in the same ways – except women are slaves to their hormones!