How Common Are MS Breathing Problems?

by LIBBY SELINSKY

Do MS Symptoms Cause Breathing Difficulties?

It was during my first multiple sclerosis (MS) exacerbation that I experienced my first MS hug. I thought I couldn't breathe. I was terrified and had no idea what was happening to my body.

Knowing nothing about MS, I thought I was going to die. The emergency room doctor did very little to help me understand what was happening.

The MS hug is caused by your intercostal muscles involuntarily contracting. This symptom is incredibly stressful and painful, but does it cause long term harm to your ability to breathe?

Fortunately for most people with MS, the multiple sclerosis hug and breathing troubles occur less often than most other symptoms. In most people, this symptom will last only for a few hours — mine lasted days on end. Most likely though, a person will have MS for many years and never have this symptom.

Breathing difficulties with MS are usually caused by three different factors that can be regulated with careful monitoring.

Muscle Weakness

The intercostal muscles, while not the most important respiratory muscles, are still very valuable in aiding your chest walls in expansion and contraction. These intercostal muscles can be affected by your MS and, over time, are capable of becoming fatigued or losing strength.

Inflammation can cause an exacerbation of this symptom. Often, this type of exacerbation will be treated with anti-spasticity or anti-inflammatory medications to relieve a vast majority of your discomfort.

Sometimes, this symptom can cause cumulative damage. A person's ability to speak and converse for long periods of time can become exhausting and a longer-term treatment plan with speech pathologists and physical therapists will be put in place.

Medications

Not all breathing problems are caused by MS itself. Unfortunately, there can be times when your body will react negatively to the medications you have been prescribed.

I love that my doctor's office reviews all of my medications at every appointment. This has become a standard practice with any doctor worth their salt.

Still, it is important to make sure your medications are being watched closely. Tranquilizers, muscle relaxants and

opioid analgesics can reduce your body's ability to breathe normally. Take heed to the dosing directions you receive and be sure to pay attention to changes in your body while taking these meds.

Swallowing Difficulties and Breathing

Swallowing problems, medically called dysphagia, can occur when a person's muscles in the tongue and throat are not working properly. This symptom usually happens during a more advanced stage of this disease.

With dysphagia, a person will struggle with chewing and swallowing. The end result is that food will become inhaled into the trachea rather than traveling down the esophagus.

Food traveling into the trachea is called aspiration. Once in the lungs, the presence of food can cause pneumonia and abscesses that need to be treated immediately.

Fortunately, there are physical therapies and medical treatments that can assist in protecting people from falling seriously ill from this scenario. However, this is a serious situation and one that must be looked at for long-term treatment plans in order to ensure patients' symptoms do not get overlooked and under treated.

For people who are further progressed in their MS journey, it is important to create a strong support system that is aware of the risks involved and the warning signs to watch out for with swallowing disorders.

Next page: reducing stress so you can breathe easy

Dealing With Uncertainty

MS is a disease that throws a wrench into the seemingly simplest tasks. Breathing is the essence of life. MS does not seem to want to even leave that most basic building block in its place.

However, living with MS today means your average life expectancy will not change. That could not be said 15 or 20 years ago.

MS and its symptoms are much more controlled than ever before. We are incredibly fortunate to have tools and resources at our disposal that were never dreamed of just a short time ago.

Dealing with your breath being stolen from you is stressful. It is unfair. It is something I wouldn't wish on anyone.

Empower Yourself

Empowering yourself is the best way of dealing with the stress. There are things you can do to keep yourself safe and strong with your breathing issues.

The first thing you need to do is to build and maintain a strong personal bond with your health care team.

Find a neurologist you can confide in and trust. Select caregivers that are patient-focused and willing to create treatment options that are comfortable and reliable for you. Nothing can replace a trusted medical team that is accessible, reliable and flexible!

Reduce Stress

I know, stress comes easy when breath comes hard. This is why yoga is so wonderful for people with MS.

Yoga is great for breathing. Every stretch, every position, every movement is breath-focused.

Stretching and reducing stress are what yoga is all about and, though it might seem counterintuitive, yoga can really be the perfect therapy for you when your intercostal muscles are flaring up.

Be sure to use poses that are meant for relaxation instead of exertion and you can aid in alleviating the pain of your symptoms.

If It's Legal Where You Live…

Another stress reducer, if you are living in the states where it is legal, would be to use marijuana. I know it is still a controversial topic for many people out there, but it is useful in relaxation.

Smoking it probably will not have great long-term results for your lung health, but there are other ways of ingesting it. Also, marijuana is known for having anti-spasticity qualities that can help with your MS hug pain.

Know Your Body

Breathing problems can be scary, but they are rare. It is important to know your body and to understand the risks of complications that can come from having MS. If you take the time to care for yourself and understand what to do if and when changes occur to your body, then you will be better set towards living a long and productive life.

MS is manageable. Give yourself the space in this world to prioritize and set security nets into place and then let go of the things that you cannot control.

You are strong, you are capable, you are human. You have a place in this world and you still have every chance to create beauty and life around you. Remember that, and enjoy your time here. The world likes to throw us curveballs, but MS trains us on how to knock those curveballs out of the park.