29 Tips to Help You Manage Common MS Symptoms

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Tips for Managing MS Symptoms

There is a plethora of symptoms to worry about when you have multiple sclerosis, some of them easier to manage than others. Let's look at some of the common symptoms of MS and the treatment options available for each.

What Can Help My Fatigue?

Fatigue and MS go hand in hand – it is easily the most common symptom, affecting approximately 80 percent of MS patients. Fatigue can keep you from functioning well at home and work.

Fortunately, there are ways to manage MS-related fatigue:

- **Regular exercise.** Simple stretching exercises, yoga poses, low-intensity exercise or walking around can instantly help boost your energy levels. Just be careful not to overdo it.
- **Consistent sleep times.** Incorporating a sleeping routine is essential to combat your fatigue. If you want to get eight hours of well-rested sleep, you can start by aiming for a bed-time around 8 PM or 9 PM.
- **Eating a healthy diet.** A diet that is filled with convenient unhealthy snacks or meals isn't helping your fatigue. Instead of grabbing a sugary snack, grab a handful of nuts instead.
- **Conserving energy for things important to you.** Focus on what you need to get done today and don't be afraid to put other things off. Exhausting yourself will only lead to more fatigue.

What Are My Options for Walking Difficulties?

Many factors can cause problems with gait, including weakness, loss of equilibrium, sensory deficit, and spasticity. Some options you can try to help with your walking difficulties are:

- **Physical therapy.** A physical therapist will first assess you and evaluate where your strengths and weakness are. They will create a plan to help you accomplish goals with aerobic exercises, strength training, and balance, stretching and flexibility exercises you can do at home or in your physical therapist's office.
- **Assistive technology.** Assistive therapy can include the use of wheelchairs, walkers, canes, crutches and more. These assistive devices are here to help you save energy and help you get around the house.

How Can I Help Reduce Spasticity?

Spasticity associated with MS can refer to stiffness in the joints and various involuntary muscle spasms, most commonly in the legs. Interventions include:

- **Physical therapy.** A physical therapist will provide a stretching routine within the first few visits. The reasons why your physical therapist recommends stretching is because it helps to lengthen the muscles. This will help decrease spasticity.
- **Regular exercise.** Just like regular exercise combats fatigue, it can also help to lessen spasticity. Start with low-impact exercises like yoga or walking before attempting activities like lifting weights.
- **Medications.** If physical therapy doesn't help or isn't as effective, your doctor may prescribe you medication that is known to reduce spasticity in MS. Medications include Baclofen, Valium, Zanaflex and other anti-seizure drugs.

What Can Combat MS Weakness?

Generalized weakness is the result of muscles that are not being used. This occurs either by the deconditioning of them or damage to the nerves responsible for stimulating the muscles. Interventions include*:*

- **Rehabilitation.** The goal of rehabilitation for MS is to help improve and maintain body functions. A rehabilitation team's approach focuses on problems with mobility, weakness, balance and coordination issues and will develop a program to help with MS weakness.
- **Medication.** Your doctor may prescribe medications to help with weakness. A common drug that helps with MS weakness is potassium channel blockers (Ampyra).

Is There a Solution to My MS Bladder Problems?

Bladder incontinence and related problems can be embarrassing and troubling for people with multiple sclerosis. Not only can it affect one's overall quality of life, but it can also affect them psychologically and socially.

As many as 80 percent of all patients with MS experience bladder problems like urinary urgency, incontinence, and hesitancy in urination.

If you experience MS-related bladder problems, there are a few ways to address the situation:

- **Bladder controlling medications.** Medications prescribed for bladder dysfunction are quite effective and may help to relieve symptoms entirely. For example, Oxybutynin is one option and is usually taken one to three times daily.
- **Catheterization.** Another tool that may help your MS bladder symptoms is an intermittent catheterization. Catheterization helps to eliminate urine from the bladder through a catheter on a regular basis.
- **Dietary management.** Many types of food and drinks can act as a diuretic which causes you to visit the bathroom more often. You can identify your triggers by creating a bladder journal and which in-turn can help you to avoid those particular foods.

Next page: Four more common MS symptoms and their treatment options.

How Can I Cope With Sexual Problems?

Sexual response can be affected in patients with MS, as the condition damages the central nervous system. A person’s self-esteem or mental health may be altered negatively as well, which can translate to sexual dysfunction.

In one study, 63 percent of people with MS reported that intimacy had declined since receiving their diagnosis. Another survey discovered that as many as 91 percent of men and 72 percent of women with MS might be affected by sexual problems.

This is no reason to give up hope. There are many ways to cope with sexual problems

- **Psychological therapy.** Talking with a licensed professional can help you deal with your intimacy

problems. A therapist can be more than just venting your frustrations or deepest emotions, and they can also provide mental strategies or coping tips to help you overcome pain or discomfort you feel during sex.
- **Improve couple communication.** Your partner is here to support you–no matter what you're going through. By opening up about your problems, you and your partner can work together to develop ways to decrease pain during physical intimacy.
- **Use water-soluble lubricants.** If you're a woman, a common symptom of sexual dysfunction in women with MS is vaginal dryness. You can relieve the pain you feel from vaginal dryness during sexual activities with lubricants. You can find lubricants at your local pharmacy.
- **Medications.** For less pain during intercourse, improve fatigue and improve other symptoms would help people with MS less apprehensive about sex. For men, you can try medications like Viagra, Cialis or Levitra.

What Can Help With My MS Bowel Problems?

Bowel problems in people with MS can cause feelings of discomfort, embarrassment or may even exacerbate other MS symptoms. The most common bowel problems in MSer's is constipation, loss of bowel control, and diarrhea.

While dealing with MS bowel problems is uncomfortable, there are ways to remedy it:

- **Drink plenty of fluids.** It is recommended that adults drink 8-12 (8 oz.) cups of water per day. You can also incorporate juices and other non-alcoholic beverages into your drinking routine.
- **Physical activity.** Walking, swimming, yoga, and low-impact exercises can all help to get the bowels moving.
- **Eating a diet with adequate fiber.** Following a diet that has whole-grains, fruits and vegetables can help to soften stools and lessen diarrhea.
- **Medications.** Remedies to help with bowel problems may include laxatives, stool softeners, bulk-forming supplements, enemas, or suppositories. Remember to discuss with your doctor about your bowel problems before trying an over-the-counter remedy.

What Are Some Effective MS Pain Treatments?

Many MS sufferers experience pain; one study found that about half of the MS participants experienced a significant amount of pain at one point, and about half of them overall have had chronic pain.

The medications given to persons with MS to control pain are from other classes of drug groups. Studies have found that these drugs are effective in managing the pain experienced by the patients. Interventions include:

- **Pain management strategies.** These strategies involve working with your physician, neurologist, physical therapist and psychologist to find ways to cope and manage your pain.
- **Anti-seizure medications.** Drugs like Tegretol and Dilantin have been found to be useful for pain control in MS patients.
- **Antidepressants.** Antidepressants can treat more than just anxiety and depression, and they can even help relieve pain. It is believed that antidepressants work by increasing levels of neurotransmitters, like serotonin, in the brain and spinal cord that regulate pain sensations from the body. Well-known antidepressants used for pain are Elavil, Pamelor, and Effexor.
- **Over-the-counter pain medications.** If you're looking for an affordable way to manage your pain, options like Ibuprofen and Diclofenac can help immensely.
- **Prescribed pain medications.** If over-the-counter solutions don't work, you will need to talk to your doctor about your pain medication options. Your doctor may prescribe muscle relaxants, prescription-only NSAIDs, Botox, or Opioids.

What Should I Do About My Depression?

Clinical depression is the most common form of depression within the population of MS. Numerous factors can cause depression, from feeling isolated to receiving a diagnosis to MS-related changes.

Don't give up though, and there are treatment options for depression out there to help:

- **Antidepressants.** Numerous antidepressants may help to treat your depression. Your physician will discuss with you what your options are.
- **Psychotherapy.** Talk therapy may help people with MS who are emotionally overwhelmed. This type of treatment provides helpful coping strategies and a safe place to vent out your difficulties and feelings.

The Takeaway

Using therapies that do not involve taking medication should not be ignored. Things like journaling and yoga are activities that are relaxing and may de-stress your life.

As you're likely aware, stress can aggravate symptoms such as pain and fatigue. By practicing stress-relieving methods, you can control some of the symptoms MS causes. Being empowered will also boost your confidence.

Resources

National Multiple Sclerosis Society (MS Symptoms)

MS Active Source (Managing MS Symptoms)

Multiple Sclerosis Center (Symptom Management)