How Does MS Affect the Body?

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Understanding MS and the Body

Understanding how multiple sclerosis (MS) affects the body is a huge topic and can be hard to explain; no two people will experience it in the same way. I have a friend with MS, for example, who has no obvious disability compared to me, but is crippled with fatigue so much she can no longer work. I have another acquaintance whose eyesight is getting worse but has no other physical symptoms.

The impact on me is obvious; I can hardly walk — but my eyesight is great and fatigue isn't my worse symptom. (I have just touched wood obviously!)

To understand how MS affects the body, I think we need to go right back to basics and think about what has gone wrong in the body compared to "normal" people.

What Is MS?

MS is an autoimmune disease and occurs when the immune system attacks the fatty material called Myelin, which wraps around your nerve fibers to protect them. I often think of an electrical cord when I think about Myelin and imagine stripping back the plastic to see the wires exposed underneath. Without the Myelin, the nerves become damaged and scar tissue forms. Just like an electrical cord, if the plastic is damaged, the wire becomes faulty and the device won't work properly.

This damage makes it harder for the brain to send signals through your body correctly and the scar tissue on the Myelin interferes with these signals.

The trouble with MS is that this damage can happen anywhere in your brain, spinal cord, or optic nerve so symptoms can vary dramatically from one person to the next and the MSer never knows when it's going to strike next!

What Can Be Affected?

The body can be affected in many ways and MSers can experience problems with the following:

- walking
- muscle weakness or spasm
- fatigue
- numbness and tingling
- blurred or double vision
- numbness and tingling
- sexual problems
- cognitive problems such as concentration or memory

- bladder and bowel control
- pain
- problems with balance
- depression

The good news is not everyone will experience these symptoms and not usually all at the same time!

Relapse

With Relapsing and Remitting MS (RRMS), your immune system attacks the Myelin causing a relapse or flare-up of symptoms. The body will recover after a week or so and things return to normal. Most people are diagnosed with this form of MS and usually plenty of rest and a course of steroids can speed up the recovery process. Typically no lasting damage occurs. Occasionally though, an attack can be so severe that things don't return to normal and you can be left with lasting disability.

This is what happened to me a few years ago. I had a severe relapse which left me with balance problems and an inability to lift my legs properly. It was as if my balance went overnight. I remember a feeling of vertigo when I was crossing a street. I was stranded in the middle of the road and luckily my husband was there to offer his arm to help me.

Secondary Progressive MS (SPMS)

Some people go on to develop SPMS in which relapses are no longer experienced but symptoms get progressively worse. I no longer get severe relapses so I asked my neurologist if I have SPMS. He told me he disagrees with labeling MSers as no two people are the same, so who knows! I do get flare-ups caused by stress or illness but usually things calm down again.

How to Minimize the Impact on Our Bodies

Luckily there are things we can do to minimize the effect MS has on our bodies.

For RRMS, there are Disease Modifying Therapies (DMT's) which reduce the number of relapses and slow down the progression, reducing the severity of disability. Research suggests it's better to start medication as soon as possible after diagnosis to increase your chances. Speak to your neurologist or health care team to see which DMT would suit you best. There are new therapies being developed all the time and many can be taken orally, which is better than injections or infusions in the hospital.

For those of us with worsening disability, it's important to stay as active as possible to minimize the impact. I'm currently having physiotherapy to help improve my balance and my ability to stand. This involves gentle exercises and working on core strength. Speak to your health care professional to see if there are sessions available in your area. There are exciting new therapies being developed for SPMS too and research is being conducted on how to repair Myelin damage so the prognosis for use may be improved in the future.

Diet and exercise can also help and a positive attitude is the best way to reduce the impact MS has. Speak to your neurologist and see what can help you.