How Does Multiple Sclerosis Affect Hand Function?

by ABIGAIL BUDD

MS Hands: What You Need to Know

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) in 2008, I remember being terrified about losing my mobility and ending up in a wheelchair. I was preoccupied with this possibility, and it never occurred to me that there would be other symptoms that, arguably, cause more problems, such as MS hands.

My mobility issues are solved by using a scooter, and this has enabled me to stay at work or enjoy other activities, such as shopping or going out with my family. As long as there are no stairs, I can join in most things, and many people stop noticing my mobility scooter.

There is no such solution for the problems with my hands though, and I would argue that MS hands cause sufferers as many, if not more problems, than not being able to walk.

Because it is not immediately obvious, people underestimate the impact MS has on my hands and can be surprised when I enlighten them.

What's the Connection Between MS and Hand Function?

Both my hands are weaker than they once were, but it is especially noticeable in my right hand. Naturally, I am right-handed, so most everyday tasks are affected.

I have constant pins and needles and numbness in my hands, which gets worse with fatigue or when it is particularly hot.

This means fine motor tasks are pretty difficult for me. For example, I cannot manage small buttons and need help most mornings doing my bra up! I have trouble with laces and shoe fastenings, as well as brushing or tying up my hair.

The numbness makes it hard to feel if I am holding something, so I often drop things which can be infuriating. It's also getting more and more challenging to write, as holding a pen feels heavy and cumbersome. Typing is also challenging, and I have to take numerous breaks for my hands to recover when I am writing articles.

This impacts me a lot at work too. I take handwritten notes when interviewing my service users, and one asked me if I was using shorthand the other day, as my handwriting was so illegible. I type up my notes whenever I can, but this takes double the time, so it is not always possible.

I'm forever dropping pens onto the floor and find sifting through paper files so difficult. It's as if I am wearing boxing gloves to leaf through paper, and sometimes I feel like launching it all across the office!

Eating can also be difficult, as using a knife and fork with boxing gloves on is not easy. Cutting up food requires strength in both hands so when it is really bad, my husband helps me. I often find food falls off the fork on my way to my mouth, and I have been known to leave food before I am full as it is all too difficult.

I always feel self-conscious when I am eating out, and use my left hand wherever possible.

What Causes Hand Problems With MS?

As with all symptoms of MS, damage to the brain and spinal cord disrupt messages to the hands. I suffered a particularly bad relapse once and was unable to use my right hand for anything. This lasted around five weeks, and although it got much better, it has never been the same.

Neuropathic pain can cause weird sensations, like numbness and pins and needles, which can come and go or be omnipresent like mine!

I find my hands are much worse in the heat of the summer and repetitive tasks like writing cards or typing an article require frequent rest as fatigue builds up.

What Can Be Done to Improve Hand Problems With MS?

As stated above, there is nothing we can put on like magic gloves to solve it, but there are things we can do to improve symptoms.

Leave plenty of time for tasks – don't try doing all your cards at once as your writing will get worse. Here are some other things to try:

- **Exercises** – You can find hand-strengthening exercises online.
- **Hand grips and therapy** – Speak to your occupational therapist or neurologist as you can do hand workouts using these aids.
- **Voice software** – This is to help with typing (although I would be self-conscious about talking to myself in the office).
- **Talk to friends, family and employers** – Explain what impact MS has on your hands and ask for help if needed.
- **Rest** – Most MS symptoms improve with rest, and your hands are no different.

It's important to me that I maintain as much independence as possible, so I need to make sure I keep my hands as strong as possible for as long as possible given that my legs gave up years ago.

I need my hands for holding my weight while I transfer from a chair to my scooter. I also drive using hand controls so I cannot afford to lose any more strength.

The number of tasks we complete each day using our hands is mind-blowing, and I don't know why this did not occur to me years ago when I was stressing out about needing a wheelchair. I hope someone comes up with magic hands to fix the problem once and for all!