Understanding Prescription Options for Multiple Sclerosis

by ERICA WILSON

Everything You Need to Know About Medications for MS

Years ago, there were little to no treatment options for multiple sclerosis (MS). Now, there are oral, self-injectable, and infused medications available for different types of MS with new ones being introduced, seemingly, every day.

Because of the uniqueness the disease displays for each person, finding the right medication includes some trial and error. Luckily, there are different options when it comes to medications for MS.

My First Experience

When I was first diagnosed with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis (RRMS) in 2016, my neurologist at the time placed me on Tecfidera, an oral medication option. I had no side effects, but it was a fail for me because it did not prevent new lesions.

That's the thing, the medications on the market do not cure MS. They also do not (on most occasions) reverse any damage already done by our very aggressive immune systems. They are created to hopefully slow the progression of the disease. No guarantees.

There are other oral options besides Tecfidera. They include:

- Gilenya
- Aubagio
- Mavenclad
- Vumerity
- Mayvent

What if Oral Medications Won't Work for Me?

Since Tecfidera did not work for me, my neurologist sent me to an MS specialist who then put me on Ocrevus, an infused medication. While I did not have any new lesions while on this medication, I found myself fatigued, in a lot of pain, and bedridden for the six months between infusions. I can only share my experience.

As you know, MS is different for every person. The same holds true for the medications. Many people swear by Ocrevus and have shown major improvement while on it. I felt better once it left my system, so I swore off medications for a little over a year.

My most recent trial was Tysabri, an infused 'cousin' to Ocrevus. I've been taking it for almost one year. It took about six infusions (six months) for my body to adjust, but after that time, it was okay. Other infusion medications for MS include Lemtrada and Novantrone.

Some choose the oral route because it's easier and much less time consuming than sitting at a hospital for hours hooked up to an IV for an infusion. I have no experience with the next type of medication, self-injectables, but I have heard and read mixed reviews.

If you choose a self-injectable treatment, there are some tips I've found to help make you more comfortable (well, as comfortable as you can be jabbing a needle into your body):

- Rotate your injection site to protect your skin
- Take treatment as prescribed

Always remember to talk to your doctor or healthcare professional about how to exercises or other resources to help minimize your pain and help you feel more comfortable.

MS Medication Side Effects to Be Aware Of

All MS medications come with the risk of side effects. Most of the effects are flu-like symptoms. Others include:

- Joint pain
- Skin irritation
- Needle fatigue
- Low white blood cell count

There are more that are specific to each medication. Make sure you do any necessary research so that you can make an informed decision with your doctor.

Managing Your Symptoms

There are so many symptoms that come with an MS diagnosis. Some are just natural aging by-products, but MS likes to make them worse. For instance, bladder control can become more challenging to manage.

Sometimes when a woman has given birth, it weakens the bladder muscles, causing a little leakage when we chuckle or sneeze. MS sees your leakage and raises it to a trickle or even a stream.
Sometimes people, even adults, can feel tired and need a nap. MS fatigue makes you feel like you are carrying a couple of boulders. Uphill. Up a steep hill. With no end. There can also be pain, spasticity, bowel issues, or depression.

However, there is relief for these symptoms. I have found, though, that there are other options for relief besides pills. Recently, I have changed my diet. Nothing drastic, just keeping track of what I eat and how it makes me feel. I have also started a small workout routine.

These changes have helped me pull back on the medications that I take. I still take my vitamin D3, because without it, my levels plummet, and duloxetine (Cymbalta) for my nerve pain and mild depression. The exercises help with the spasticity, so I no longer take a muscle relaxant. Always discuss any changes with your doctor.

The Takeaway

There are many options for MS treatment. Finding the right one is tricky, but not impossible. Some with MS choose to forego disease management therapies (DMTs) completely, either because of the risks, side effects, or they just don't work. You have to do what is right for you.

No one knows your body better than you do, so be sure to know your options, track your symptoms, be ready and informed when you see your doctor.