How Does MS Affect Your Ability to Walk?

by ERICA WILSON

Walking With MS: What You Need to Know

In the nearly 18 months since I have been graced with the presence of multiple sclerosis (MS), one of the many issues I have is walking without falling over or bumping into walls.

My initial symptoms happened so suddenly, that I didn't have time to get used to my new inability. One day I was fine and literally, the next day (well, the next-next day), I was numb on my left side and leaving the hospital with a cane.

I learned very quickly that MS did not appreciate my 'sexy walk' and proceeded to change it to my 'not-so-sexy toddler shuffle'. Following, are some specific walking issues that MSers deal with daily:

- Foot drop (or drop foot) is a term for difficulty lifting the front part of the foot. It may drag on the ground when you walk.
- Spasticity is a MS symptom that causes your muscles to feel stiff, heavy and difficult to move.
- Spasm is the sudden stiffening of a muscle that causes a limb to kick out or jerk.

All these lovely symptoms combine to make walking not only unattractive, but hazardous. I have experienced all of these at some point, usually because I have misjudged my good day and overdrawn my 'spoons account'. If you tend to overextend on a regular basis, it is always best to have some sort of mobility device with you because of the unpredictability of this disease.

Feeling Like I'm On A High Wire

Most days, I amble around my house without my cane, but there are days when the earth suddenly shifts on its axis and I find myself grabbing onto the walls to keep from falling. I can only dream that I look as elegant as the folks on the high wire at the circus.

The swaying and stumbling is caused by poor nerve conduction and is called ataxia. Your doctor can assist you in finding an aid that will help you remain upright and avoid injury.

I started out using a traditional cane, but because I also have joint pain, I switched to a forearm crutch. It has much better support and the grip is different, so it helps with the pain in my hands and wrists.

MS Gait – It's Not Pretty

So what does MS gait look like? To put it simply, it looks like a field sobriety test.

If you've ever seen one in person or on television, a policeman is standing back, arms crossed, watching an alleged drunk person try to walk a straight line, one foot in front of the other. The straight line is more like a curvy,

wobbly, arm-flying mess.

Without my crutch, this is what I look like. Or, like a toddler learning how to walk. What I dislike most is how suddenly it happens. Many physicians will recommend physical therapy to help if nothing else works. Be sure to discuss any concerns with your doctor, especially if you are trying something new.

What About Stairs?

I have read that some MSers use stairs for exercise. I am not one of those people, but there are a number of videos on YouTube that show you some safe ways to use them. Exercise is actually a good way to help with balance and walking issues.

Depending on your level of disability, here are some to try (after you discuss it with your doctor):

- Aerobic exercise for 30 minutes twice a week. Swimming is a good one if you have walking issues.
- Hand biking uses a three-wheeled device in which the pedals are operated by hands instead of feet.
- Stretching improves flexibility, balance, range of motion, etc. Tai Chi and yoga are good examples. My MS resource center offers these classes for free. Check your local center for more information.
- Resistance training using low weights and high repetitions improves gait and balance as well as builds muscle.

I try to avoid stairs if at all possible. It is more difficult to navigate stairs with a cane. If I have no choice, I tuck my cane and use the handrails. The most important thing to remember is safety first. If you are out alone and do not feel safe using stairs, please find someone to help you.

Stairs at Home

If you have stairs in your home, there are some ways you can adapt your home to make it MS-friendly.

- Place reflective, non-skid strips on your stairs or steps
- Install railings on both sides of stairs. They should extend beyond the first and last steps
- Install a ramp to prevent falls

Remember Safety First

Navigating life with MS can be challenging, but can also boost your creativity level. I cannot emphasize enough, the importance of safety.

Please consult your physician before starting any exercise regime or making any significant changes to your lifestyle.

If you are having trouble coming to terms with using a cane or other device, try to embrace your new normal being as positive as you can. There are some nice options on the market that you can personalize.

MS is rarely fun, but life can be. Fasten your seatbelt, grab your cane and get to living!

Resources

National MS Society (Gait or Walking Problems)

National MS Society (Minimizing Your Risk of Falls)