

## Newly Diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis

### What is multiple sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is thought to be an autoimmune disease of the central nervous system (brain, spinal cord). The disease attacks myelin, the protective covering of the nerves, causing inflammation and often damaging the myelin. When this happens, the usual flow of nerve impulses along nerve fibres (axons) is interrupted or distorted.

A wide variety of MS symptoms can happen as a result of the interruption, depending upon which part or parts of the central nervous system are affected. Damaged areas are called “lesions” or “plaques”.

The types of symptoms vary greatly from person to person. They also vary in severity and duration. Symptoms might include fatigue, speech problems, visual disturbances, loss of balance, changes in sensation such as numbness or pain, bladder and bowel problems, mood changes, cognitive impairment, weakness and paralysis of any part of the body. Most people with MS do not experience all of these symptoms.

MS is not contagious, and is not inherited, although research indicates that genetic factors might make certain individuals more susceptible to the disease. MS is not a fatal disease for the vast majority, and people living with MS can expect to have a normal or near-normal life expectancy.

Anyone can get MS; however, it is most often diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 49, and females are more than three times as likely to develop MS as males. It is estimated that there are more than 77,000 Canadians living with multiple sclerosis.

### Types of MS

**Clinically isolated syndrome (CIS)** is the earliest form of MS. CIS refers to a single episode of neurological symptoms suggestive of MS. Often, on investigation using MRI the neurologist finds evidence of additional tissue damage in the brain or spinal cord. Having multiple attacks of symptoms defines **relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS)**, the most common disease course at the time of diagnosis.

RRMS is characterized by unpredictable but clearly defined relapses (also known as attacks or exacerbations) during which new symptoms appear or existing ones get worse. In the period between relapses, recovery is complete or nearly complete to pre-relapse function, and this recovery persists for a clear period of time (remission).

Most people with relapsing-remitting will eventually transition to a phase of the disease called **secondary progressive MS (SPMS)**. This phase of the disease has

progressive worsening and fewer relapses, though sometimes there are occasional relapses and minor remissions and plateaus.

**Primary-progressive MS (PPMS)** is characterized by a slow accumulation of disability, without defined relapses. It may stabilize for periods of time, and even offer minor temporary improvement but overall, there are no periods of remission. Approximately 15 per cent of people diagnosed with MS have PPMS. About five per cent of people diagnosed with PPMS experience occasional relapses with steadily worsening disease from the beginning.

## Treatments

*Disease-modifying therapies* are drugs that impact the underlying disease. These therapies target some aspect of the inflammatory process of MS and work to reduce the frequency and severity of relapses; reduce the number of lesions in the brain and spinal cord as seen on MRI; and slow down the accumulation of disability. Because of the way these medications work, they are used for treatment in individuals with relapsing forms of the disease.

*Relapse management medications* (steroids) help to decrease the severity and duration of acute MS relapses by reducing the inflammation that occurs in the central nervous system.

*Symptom management medications* help ease many MS-related symptoms such as fatigue, spasticity and pain.

In addition, there are important non-medicinal strategies to improve quality of life for people living with MS, including appropriate exercise, physiotherapy, massage, stress-reduction techniques, among other wellness approaches.

## MS and Wellness

Living a healthy lifestyle is one of the most important ways people living with MS can start taking charge of their disease. There are important strategies that may help improve quality of life. Some examples of wellness that you might wish to incorporate are:

- *Move Your Body* – Exercise is key. A variety of physical activities can be adapted to provide beneficial aerobic and strength training. Just do as much as you can, as often as you can. For guidelines on physical activity and living with MS visit [mssociety.ca](http://mssociety.ca).
- *Feed Your Health* – While there is a vast amount of research about diet and wellness, the general rule of thumb is to eat healthy. Find the personal balance that feeds your body and soul.
- *Look Beyond the Traditional* – While having a traditional healthcare team is a must for most MS protocols, many people take a holistic approach to healing and

incorporate nutritionists, naturopaths, massage therapists, or acupuncturists. Just ensure everyone involved in your healthcare is aware of all treatments.

- *Share* – Most people living with MS find it helpful to talk about their experiences. While support groups are very popular, they are not for everyone. Some people living with MS choose other avenues like writing a blog; keeping a diary; confiding in a close friend; or attending therapy sessions.
- *Cut Yourself Some Slack* – You are going to have bad days. Allow yourself to be down for a day, and then work to make tomorrow better. Just always know that you are not alone on this journey, and that help can be around the corner or a phone call away.

## How we can help

The MS Society offers a variety of programs and services to help people affected by multiple sclerosis effectively manage and cope with the disease. Please note that programs and services might vary from province-to-province.

- Information and referral
- Support and self-help groups
- Recreation, social, and wellness programs
- Conferences, workshops, and educational programs
- Quality of Life Grants
- Government relations and advocacy

Contact an MS Navigator with the **MS Knowledge Network** to learn about what programs and services are offered in your community. MS Navigators provide trusted, consistent, quality MS information and support and are available to assist anyone in Canada, from 8am to 8pm ET, Monday to Friday.

Phone: 1-844-859-6789

Email: [msnavigators@mssociety.ca](mailto:msnavigators@mssociety.ca)

Live Web Chat: visit the [MS Information](#) or [Support & Services](#) sections of our website.