

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) and cognitive problems

About the condition

MS is a neurological condition, generally diagnosed on people between 20 and 40 years of age, but it can affect younger and older people too.

MS affects people in different ways. Although not everyone will develop cognitive problems, around 65 % of people with MS experience mild cognitive symptoms; for example, finding it hard to remember information or follow a conversation. Other symptoms such as depression and mood swings are also common.

The term “dementia” is not generally used in association with MS, because the decline is not usually as severe as it is in other forms of dementia, such as Alzheimer’s disease. It is more common to describe the person as “experiencing cognitive difficulties”.

Changes that might happen

If the person with MS has repeated difficulties with memory (for example, forgetting names and places, losing objects, struggling to remember familiar words), in ways that did not happen before, a first step may be to discuss this with the GP. This may be due to MS or to other causes, such as depression, infection or side effects of medication, which may cause temporary cognitive difficulties. It is important that the GP rules these out first.

Coming to terms with the changes that cognition problems bring is often difficult and frightening. As a result, the person might experience depression and anxiety. Again, it is important to discuss these feelings with the GP, who will be able to

help to alleviate these symptoms.

The symptoms might vary from person to person. The most common difficulties are:

- learning and memory
- attention, concentration
- mental speed
- problem solving
- word-finding.

Things to consider and strategies to cope

Occupational therapists and psychologists can help the person identify areas where they could use some help. The GP should be able to refer to these professionals if necessary.

Cognitive rehabilitation is a way of re-learning lost cognitive skills. It is provided by occupational therapists or psychologists, in a group or one-to-one setting. It may improve attention, memory and problem solving. It can also have a positive effect of people’s mood.

It is important to be aware of the person’s strengths and weaknesses, so they can develop strategies that work for them. For example

- relaxation exercises can help to improve memory.
- using memory aids, like reminders, alarms, calendars and dictaphones. Notes or Post-its in obvious places can also help
- there are apps designed to help remember appointments, names and places
- establishing a routine, so there is less for the person to remember

- having a whiteboard or chalk board at home to jot down notes
- a tablet organiser
- GPS device or satellite navigation when driving
- having a set place for essential things, like keys, glasses and money and always putting them there.

There are no specific drug treatments for cognition problems in MS, but sometimes drugs used to treat Alzheimer's may be prescribed.

Problems with cognition may have an impact at work and studies. The Equality Act 2010 states that if the symptoms affect work life or studies, the person has the right to ask their employer or college/university for "reasonable adjustments" so they can continue working/studying. Most universities now have a dedicated member of staff to help with any issues you may have.

Useful information

Multiple Sclerosis Society. Cognitive problems in MS:

www.mssociety.org.uk/what-is-ms/signs-and-symptoms/memory-and-thinking/cognitive-problems

Multiple Sclerosis Trust – Cognition and cognitive symptoms

www.mstrust.org.uk/atoz/cognition.jsp

Alzheimer Europe. Cognitive Dysfunction in Multiple Sclerosis:

www.alzheimer-europe.org/Dementia/Other-forms-of-dementia/Other-Rare-Causes-of-Dementia/Cognitive-Dysfunction-in-Multiple-Sclerosis#fragment1

Free MS Society Helpline: 0808 800 8000 or email: helpline@mssociety.org.uk. Phone lines open Monday to Friday, from 9 am to 9 pm (excluding bank holidays).

Multiple Sclerosis: Understanding the Cognitive Challenges, by Nicholas LaRocca and Rosalind Kalb, with John Deluca and Lauren Caruso. New York, Demos Medical Publishing, 2006, 152 pages.

Facing the Cognitive Challenges of Multiple Sclerosis, 2nd ed. by Jeffrey N. Gingold. New York, Demos Medical Publishing, 2011, 240 pages.



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