

Many people live with MS. Around 85,000 people in the UK have this condition.

Here are a few contacts to help you find out more about living with MS and talk to others who live with it:

- www.msactivesource.co.uk
- www.msactivesource.ie
- www.msdecisions.org.uk

The following organisations are also available to help:

Multiple Sclerosis Society
www.mssociety.org.uk
Helpline: 0808 800 8000
email: helpline@mssociety.org.uk

Multiple Sclerosis Trust
www.mstrust.org.uk
Tel: 01462 476700
email: info@mstrust.org.uk

Irish Multiple Sclerosis Society
www.ms-society.ie
Helpline: 1850 233233
email: mshelpline@ms-society.ie



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What is Multiple Sclerosis?



Supporting you
each step of the way

What is MS?

■ Many people live with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). Around 85,000 people in the UK have this condition.

MS is a disease that affects the central nervous system. The central nervous system is made up of your brain and spinal cord. Your brain sends electrical impulses which contain messages for your body, via nerve fibres along your spinal cord. It is these messages that control functions such as movement and thought.

In MS, your immune system, which usually helps fight disease, mistakes your nerve tissue for a

foreign body and attacks it. That's why it is known as an autoimmune disease. The immune system attacks the protective outside covering of nerve fibres, called 'myelin', which then becomes inflamed. Over time this causes scars or lesions (known as demyelination) to develop in the brain and along the spinal cord, which disrupt messages travelling along the nerves between them. So, for example, motor nerves which operate muscles, and sensory nerves which control sensations such as touch, may not work properly.

■ How can it affect the body?

Damage can occur in different areas of the central nervous system. Because these areas control many different parts of the body, symptoms can be wide-ranging. The most common ones include weakness, tiredness, loss of balance, numbness, tremors, eyesight problems, muscle stiffness, sexual problems, bladder and bowel problems.

Owing to nerve damage in the brain, MS can also affect the way you take in information and process it. For example, the way you think, the way you become aware of things through your senses (smell, sight, sound, touch, taste), your ability to concentrate on tasks and to problem-solve, and your memory. These ways of gaining knowledge are described by the term 'cognition'.

Sometimes MS can slow down and disrupt these processes, making day-to-day tasks at work or home more difficult.

■ How can MS affect my emotions?

MS can trigger mood swings where one moment you can feel up and the next you are feeling down. It can also trigger periods of depression when you may feel very sad and think that things are hopeless.

These feelings vary from person to person. They can be due to physical changes in the brain caused by MS. Also, the changes and challenges MS can bring to your life can be difficult to adjust to and may contribute to feelings of depression.

Many people can suffer from depression; not just those with MS. It is nothing to be ashamed of and it can be effectively treated. So don't be afraid to talk about your feelings with your doctor or nurse.

■ What are the different forms of MS?

Most people diagnosed with MS have the relapsing-remitting form. This means that they have attacks (relapses) during which symptoms are worse. These attacks come and go in no regular pattern, and are followed by periods where symptoms disappear or are not as bad (remissions).

Sometimes, due to nerve damage building up over time, MS can progress to what is known as 'secondary progressive'. This doesn't happen to everyone, but, if it does, it means that your MS symptoms may become steadily worse and remain irrespective of whether you continue to have attacks or not.

Some people will have a small number of attacks, followed by a complete recovery – this is known as benign MS.

It is also possible to get a type of MS known as 'primary progressive' where symptoms steadily worsen from the outset and continue to progress over time.

There is no cure yet for MS but there are treatments that can slow down the rate of symptoms worsening and reduce the frequency and severity of attacks.

