

Managing pain for people living with MS

Pain in multiple sclerosis (MS)

- Approximately 60 percent of people with MS experience pain that troubles them or interferes with their daily activities.
 - This pain can be caused by the MS disease itself – due to damage or changes to the central nervous system, bones, muscles or soft tissues – or by unrelated causes, such as an injury or other illness.
 - Given that most MS-related pain is chronic (lasting more than three months), it is important for people with MS to develop a strategy to manage it effectively.
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Getting help for pain

General practitioners (GP) can help people with MS to manage their pain on a daily basis and, especially, with sudden or severe pain. They can also establish if the pain may be caused by something other than MS. People with MS should also consult their neurologist about any new pain, changes in their pain or unusual sensations.

These doctors may refer people with MS to a specialist pain clinic or other health professional, such as a physiotherapist and/or psychologist, for further assessment and advice on managing pain. Health professionals at MS Australia – ACT/NSW/Vic will also be helpful.

When visiting a doctor, it is important to be prepared with a list of things to tell them and a list of questions to ask. Writing down the answers will help in understanding and remembering what has been discussed.

Families and carers will also be helpful to people with MS who are experiencing pain. Communication is important so that the family member or carer can understand how pain is affecting the person with MS, and how they can be supportive.

Pain management strategies

- **Medication.** Medications commonly prescribed for MS-related pain fall into five main categories: anti-convulsants, anti-depressants, simple analgesics, strong analgesics, and anti-spasmodics. The type of medication a doctor recommends will depend on the source of the pain. While medication can help reduce pain, it rarely relieves MS-related pain completely.
 - **Physical activity and exercise.** Long periods of rest or inactivity due to pain can lead to a gradual loss of strength and fitness, and difficulty performing day-to-day activities. Regular physical activity and exercise can reverse these effects and help with pain. Physiotherapists and exercise physiologists can assist individuals to develop an exercise regime suited to their needs and ability.
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- **Slow breathing and relaxation techniques.** Symptoms of stress can actually make pain worse. Slow breathing or other relaxation exercises can help reduce tension and stress. Listening to music may also help, as can other relaxation/breathing practices, such as meditation and yoga.
 - **Goal setting.** While pain can be disruptive, setting realistic goals and planning can help many people achieve the things they want to do.
 - **Behavioural strategies.** Strategies such as challenging your thinking, problem solving and managing sleep patterns can all help with pain management.
 - **Create a pain management plan.** It is important to develop and maintain a pain management plan that takes into account who can help with pain; what is being done to manage the pain; when these strategies should be reviewed; and what to do in an emergency.
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Further reading

For more information about pain and a practical tool to assist in developing a pain management plan, refer to our booklet *Managing Pain for People Living with MS*. For a copy of the booklet call MS Connect on 1800 042 138 or download it from our website at www.msaustralia.org.au/actnswvic (under publications).

For information about MS and MS Australia – ACT/NSW/VIC services:

MS Connect™: 1800 042 138

Email: msconnect@msaustralia.org.au

Web: www.msaustralia.org.au/actnswvic

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