

Choices



Visual symptoms



Read me...

Visual symptoms

Visual symptoms are common amongst people with MS.

There are three types of visual symptoms in MS: optic neuritis, nystagmus and diplopia (double vision). Some people also experience temporary blurring of vision, temporary loss of vision, pain with eye movement and blind spots.

Visual problems are often the first symptoms associated with multiple sclerosis.

Optic neuritis

Optic neuritis is a common symptom in MS. It is caused for inflammation or demyelination to the optic nerve at the back of the eye, which transmits the signals from the visual image from the eye to the brain.

Optic neuritis causes a disturbance in vision – sometimes blurring, and often a reduction in colour vision, particularly for the colour red. Optic neuritis can also cause a headache, or a pain behind the eye when the eye moves.

Visual flashing sensations can be present and over half of those affected by optic neuritis will experience Uhthoff's Sign – in which symptoms worsen with heat or exhaustion.

Optic neuritis is a variable condition where vision can be moderately to severely affected. It usually occurs in one eye, but can occur in both eyes at the same time.

Optic neuritis starts suddenly and progresses for a few weeks before recovery happens spontaneously, although treatment with steroids may be advised by your MS nurse.

If the optic nerve is damaged by demyelination a permanent loss of visual acuity (acuteness or clearness of vision), may be experienced.

Nystagmus

Nystagmus is a condition in which the eyes move involuntarily. The movement is usually horizontal but it can also be vertical or rotary. In almost all cases, both eyes move together. More often than not the person with MS is unaware that this is happening.

If nystagmus continues for a period of time it can cause dizziness, nausea and loss of balance.

Although nystagmus is quite a common symptom, treatment of this condition is limited at present. Drug therapy with gabapentin or memantine may help.

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Other things worth bearing in mind are looking into the angle of vision, as this can be important. Many people with nystagmus have a null point (by looking to one side or the other, or up or down) where the eye movement is reduced and vision improved. Those with a null point will often adopt a head posture to make best use of vision. Sitting to one side of a screen, or whiteboard often helps.

Diplopia

Diplopia, or double vision, can be a very early symptom of MS. It is caused when the pair of muscles that control a particular eye movement are weakened. The muscles then become uncoordinated and this disturbs the vision by producing images in double. It may also cause loss of balance because spatial orientation is disturbed.

The sudden onset of double vision, poor contrast, eye pain or heavy blurring can be worrying, but the prognosis for recovery from many vision problems associated with MS is good.

Double vision is usually temporary. It can occur through fatigue or over usage of the eyes. For example, too much time spent on a computer or reading for a long time. Resting the eyes periodically throughout the day can be beneficial.

If you experience double vision, talk to your GP or MS nurse about a referral to an ophthalmologist.

Some people have tried acupuncture to relieve their visual problems and found it

helpful. For detailed information on finding a qualified acupuncture practitioner, see our Choices leaflet on Complementary Therapies.

Nutrition, supplements and eye health

The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) suggests that the key vitamins for eye health are the antioxidants – vitamins A, C and E. These vitamins can be found in fruit and vegetables.

The RNIB also suggest that two other antioxidants – lutein and zeaxanthin – support eye health. Lutein and zeaxanthin are also found in fruit and vegetables.

Lutein is found in mango, yellow peppers and green leafy vegetables, such as kale, chard, broccoli and cavolo nero.

Zeaxanthin is found in orange sweet peppers, citrus fruits such as oranges and tangerines, broccoli, corn, spinach and eggs. These types of food also provide vitamins A, C and E.

A study in the journal *Neurology*, published in June 2001, looking at the effect of vitamin D in recovery from acute episodes of optic neuritis in people with MS, found a link between the severity of optic neuritis and vitamin D levels – people with higher levels of vitamin D had less severe episodes of optic neuritis.

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However there was no association with high vitamin D levels and a faster recovery from optic neuritis.

If you have a healthy diet with a good balance of fruit and vegetables, then you will get all the vitamins you need from your food, although you can choose to supplement these vitamins.

For more detailed information, see our Choices leaflet on

Further information

RNIB – Royal National Institute of the Blind

105 Judd Street
London
WC1H 9NE
Helpline: 0303 123 9999 - Monday to
Friday 8.45am-5.30pm

www.rnib.org.uk

The Nystagmus Network

A website packed with information about nystagmus; including personal experiences.

Helpline: 029 2045 4242 or 0845 634
2630 open most weekdays 9am-5pm.
Email: info@nystagmusnet.org

www.nystagmusnet.org

Further reading

MS symptoms

www.ms-uk.org/choicesmssymptoms

Diet and nutrition

www.ms-uk.org/choiceslife

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How we create our Choices leaflets

MS-UK believes we must listen to the voices of people affected by multiple sclerosis to shape the information and support we provide. It is these people that bring us perspectives that no one else can give.

For every Choices leaflet we produce, MS-UK consults the wider MS community to gather feedback, and uses this to inform content. All of our Choices leaflets are then reviewed by the MS-UK Virtual Insight Panel before they are published.

Thank you to everyone affected by MS who made this leaflet possible.

Sources

- None cited

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