Choices

Is it MS?

Multiple sclerosis information

www.ms-uk.org
Welcome to this Choices leaflet about multiple sclerosis...

MS-UK believes we must listen to the voices of people affected by multiple sclerosis (MS) 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 our content. All of our Choices leaflets are then reviewed by the MS-UK Virtual Insight Panel before they are published.

This Choices leaflet has been designed with you in mind and we hope it will answer some of your questions about multiple sclerosis.
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Is it MS?

It may be that you, or someone you know, has been experiencing some symptoms and are anxious as to what these could be? They might be the kind of symptoms that give you the suspicion that it could be multiple sclerosis (MS).

It must also be said that whilst on a journey towards a diagnosis of MS, many people’s symptoms are often misdiagnosed as a different condition (1).

It is also important to note that there are many neurological conditions whereby symptoms are very similar, so what might first be thought of as symptoms of MS, may well be symptoms of another condition entirely. This leaflet provides an insight into some of what those may be.

It is important to remember that this leaflet provides guidelines and general information and should not be used to self-diagnose. Anyone with symptoms affecting their health and general wellbeing are advised to always seek appropriate medical advice from a health professional.

If you believe your symptoms are of a neurological origin, it is worth keeping a symptom diary, updating it regularly and presenting this to your health professionals each time you meet them. This may help them to see the bigger picture and treat you holistically rather than looking at symptoms in isolation.

Many people spend a long time trying to achieve a diagnosis of any kind. If your undiagnosed condition is causing symptoms that are affecting you and giving you problems you should still be entitled to help from health and social care services even without a formal diagnosis.
MS is a condition that exhibits many similar symptoms to a variety of other conditions as we will explore in this leaflet. If MS has been ruled out, it could be that you may wish to explore the possibility that one of these conditions could be the root cause of your symptoms.

Although it may feel like a journey where you keep going backwards and forwards to your GP it is always worth speaking to them about how you feel, with a list of questions you wish to ask and a copy of your symptom diary if possible. If you are being made to feel like a problem patient or do not feel you are being listened to, yet are certain that the symptoms are real, it would be reasonable to ask for a second opinion.

**Acute Disseminated Encephalomyelitis**

Acute Disseminated Encephalomyelitis (ADEM) is a rare demyelinating condition which is thought to be autoimmune in nature. ADEM and MS can be difficult to distinguish initially. It usually affects children under ten years old.

ADEM presents with a rapid onset of symptoms - headache, drowsiness and stiff neck – accompanied by the more typical neurological symptoms of optic neuritis, balance problems and walking difficulties. Occasionally the person may have a seizure. Unlike MS, ADEM tends to occur only once, for a few days and often resolves itself without treatment, although antibiotics may be given as a precaution until bacterial infection is ruled out, accompanied with intravenous steroid to reduce the inflammation in the brain.

Symptoms of ADEM which are similar to MS are

- Optic neuritis
- Balance problems
- Difficulty with talking
Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis

The most common form of Motor Neurone Disease (MND) is Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) or, as it is often referred as, ‘Lou Gehrig’s Disease’. ALS is a degenerative condition affecting the motor neurons in the brain and spinal cord. As the condition progresses and the motor neurons degenerate, muscle control is lost resulting in a difficulty with swallowing, speech, movement and breathing.

In the early stages of ALS, symptoms which are similar to MS are

- Muscle weakness or stiffness in the hands, arms, legs
- Difficulty with speech, swallowing and breathing
- Twitching and cramping of muscles

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a long-term (chronic) condition that causes widespread muscular pain. It is thought that as many as 1 person in every 25 may experience it. More women than men are affected and the condition varies a great deal from one person to another and from day to day. One important fact to note is that it does not show up on an MRI.

Symptoms of fibromyalgia which are similar to MS are

- Fatigue
- Joint and muscle pain
- Bowel problems
- Increased sensitivity to hot and cold
- Cognitive problems
- Headache
- Numbness and tingling in the extremities
Hughes Syndrome

Hughes Syndrome is a blood disorder which in some ways mimics MS. Also known as ‘sticky blood syndrome’, Hughes is a common autoimmune disease that makes the blood more thick or ‘sticky’ and therefore more prone to clotting in the veins or arteries.

Some of the symptoms of Hughes Syndrome which are similar to MS are

• Mobility - difficulty in walking, tripping or dragging foot
• Double vision
• Fatigue
• Balance
• Speech

Hughes Syndrome is easy to diagnose by a simple blood test and easy to treat with blood thinning medication such as warfarin or aspirin.

Lupus

Lupus is a disease of the immune system. Like MS, the immune system gets confused and begins to attack itself. With Lupus, however, this causes the blood stream to have too many antibodies, which leads to inflammation and damage in the joints, muscles and other areas. It affects more women than men. Some people do not have its typical rash and arthritis straight away, making symptoms seem even more like MS.

Some of the symptoms of Lupus which are similar to MS are

• Extreme fatigue
• Weakness
• Joint and muscle aches and pains.
• Migraines
**Lyme disease**

Lyme disease is an infection of the central nervous system (CNS) caused by bacteria from a tick bite. If you live in an area known for Lyme disease or have travelled to a known area recently, let your doctor know so that they can rule it out.

Some of the symptoms of Lyme disease which are similar to MS are

- Numbness
- Pins and needles
- Poor balance
- Difficulty walking
- Tremor
- Problems with vision
- Fatigue
- Headache
- Muscle and joint ache

**ME/CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome)**

Someone with ME/CFS is so fatigued that it impacts on their daily life. It is still unknown what causes ME/CFS although it sometimes follows an illness and some researchers believe that ME/CFS could be due to a reaction to common viruses.

Some of the symptoms of ME which are similar to MS are

- Fatigue
- Chronic pain
- Cognitive problems
Myasthenia Gravis

Myasthenia Gravis is a rare autoimmune condition that causes weakness in the muscles that control voluntary movement – particularly muscles in the face, meaning chewing, swallowing, talking, eyelid and eye movement, and facial expression can be affected. Muscles controlling limb movement and breathing can also be affected. Muscle weakness is exacerbated by physical movement. The difference between MS and MG is MS is an autoimmune disorder of the central nervous system (CNS) and MG is a disorder of the skeletal muscles. There is no cure for Myasthenia Gravis but treatments are available to manage the symptoms and control muscle weakness.

Symptoms of Myasthenia Gravis which are similar to MS are

- Fatigue
- Muscle weakness
- Double vision

Neuromyelitis Optica (NMO or Devic’s disease)

NMO is a very rare condition. In Europe, it is estimated that there is one case of NMO for every 100,000 people, potentially affecting less than 1000 people in the UK.

NMO can affect any age group and is predominantly a female disease with only 1 man being affected to every 4 women. Neuromyelitis is very similar to MS in that it is a disease of the nervous system where there are episodes of myelin damage. In NMO however this inflammation is almost always in the optic nerves and spinal cord.

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Some of the symptoms of NMO which are similar to MS are

- Vision problems (including temporary or permanent blindness in one or both eyes)
- Weakness of limbs
- Loss of sensation
- Bladder and bowel problems

**Sarcoidosis**

Sarcoidosis is a rare condition that causes small patches of red and swollen tissue, called granulomas, to develop in the organs of the body. However, the skin is only affected in 25% of people with sarcoidosis. However, every person is affected differently and symptoms depend on which organs are affected. Sarcoidosis can affect the brain but usually starts in the lungs.

Some of the symptoms of Sarcoidosis which are similar to MS are

- Decreased vision
- Numbness
- Muscle weakness
- Bladder and bowel problems

**Sjögren’s Syndrome**

Sjögren’s Syndrome is an autoimmune condition where the body attacks glands which produce moisture in the body – the tear ducts and the salivary glands.

Causes of Sjögren’s Syndrome are unknown, although it is linked to genetic and environmental factors. The condition is more common in women. What makes it different from MS is inflammation of the glands which can cause dry mouth and dry eyes. There is no cure for Sjögren’s Syndrome, but treatments to keep the mouth and eyes...
wet, such as artificial tear drops and artificial saliva spray, can help to manage the symptoms.

Some of the symptoms of Sjögren’s Syndrome which are similar to MS are

• Problems with chewing, swallowing and talking
• Fatigue
• Musculoskeletal pain
• Difficulty walking, balance difficulties
• Numbness and tingling

Transverse Myelitis (TM)

Transverse Myelitis is a disease of the central nervous system. Like MS it involves inflammation, however in TM the inflammation is on the spinal cord.

Some of the symptoms which are similar to those of MS are

• Weakness
• Loss of sensations
• Bladder & Bowel problems

Vitamin B12 Deficiency (also known as Folate Deficiency Anaemia)

Vitamin B12 aids the metabolism of fatty acids needed to maintain the myelin sheath which protects the axons (nerve fibres) in the brain and spinal cord. It can be identified by a simple blood test.

Some of the symptoms of B12 deficiency which are similar to MS are

• Fatigue
• Memory loss
Further information

The British Sjögren’s Syndrome Association
www.bssa.uk.net

The Encephalitis Society
www.encephalitis.info

Fibromyalgia Action UK
www.fmauk.org

Hughes Syndrome Foundation
www.hughes-syndrome.org

Lupus UK
www.lupusuk.org.uk

Lyme Disease Action
www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk

The ME Association
www.meassociation.org.uk

Motor Neurone Disease Association
www.mndassociation.org
MS-UK Choices leaflets – Symptom diary, Newly Diagnosed booklet, What is MS, Type of MS

www.ms-uk.org/choicesleaflets

Myasthenia Gravis Association

www.myaware.org

Neuromyelitis Optica UK Specialist Services

www.nmouk.nhs.uk

NHS Vitamin D information


SILA the Sarcoidosis charity

www.sila.org.uk

Transverse Myelitis Association

www.myelitis.org
About MS-UK

MS-UK is a national charity formed in 1993 supporting anyone affected by multiple sclerosis. Our hope for the future is a world where people affected by MS live healthier and happier lives.

MS-UK has always been at the forefront of promoting choice, of providing people with all the information and support they need to live life as they wish to with multiple sclerosis; whether that be through drugs, complementary therapies, lifestyle changes, a mixture of these or none at all.

We will always respect people’s rights to make informed decisions for themselves.

The MS-UK Helpline

We believe that nobody should face multiple sclerosis alone and our helpline staff are here to support you every step of the way.

Our service is informed by the lived experience of real people living with MS, so we can discuss any treatments and lifestyle choices that are of benefit, whether they are clinically evidenced or not.
New Pathways

Our bi-monthly magazine, New Pathways, is full of the latest MS news regarding trials, drug development and research as well as competitions, special offers and product reviews. The magazine connects you to thousands of other people living with MS across the country.

Available in print, audio version, large print and digitally.

MS-UK Counselling

MS-UK Counselling is open to anyone living with MS and is the only service of its kind available in the UK. Whether you want support coming to terms with a diagnosis or to improve your mental wellbeing, our counselling service is focused on helping you.

All of our MS-UK counsellors are BACP registered or accredited with an in depth knowledge of MS.
Sources

(1) MS Society - Symptoms of MS are mistaken for other conditions, survey reveals. Webpage updated 02 October 2015. Accessed 28 July 2016. www.mssociety.org.uk/ms-news/2015/05/symptoms-ms-are-mistaken-other-conditions-survey-reveals

Last reviewed: July 2016
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