Coping With MS Spasticity

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Managing Muscle Spasms and Stiffness

If you have multiple sclerosis or a loved one who does, you probably know all about spasticity, or the muscle stiffness and spasms that often accompany this condition. Spasticity targets the muscles of the legs and arms and many times interferes with free muscle movement. Spasticity is one of the early symptoms of MS and is very common.

What Causes Spasticity?

Spasticity indicates an imbalance of electrical signals within the brain and spinal cord. This imbalance leads to hyperactivity in muscle reflexes and involuntary contractions of the muscle. Increased muscle tension causes you to lose control of your muscle movement. Bouts of spasticity can be brought on by many things, including:

- Extreme temperatures
- Infections
- Humidity
- Tight clothing

Treatments for Spasticity

If you are having difficulty with spasticity from your MS, many options are available to you to help relieve it. Physical therapy and/or occupational therapy are popular treatments, as well as medications. Surgery may also be brought up if you suffer from severe spasticity. Depending on the severity of your condition and overall health, you may be prescribed one or all three of these treatment options.

These are some questions that your healthcare professional may ask:

- Is the spasticity affecting your functioning?
- Is it hindering your independence?
- Is the spasticity painful?
- What treatment options have you tried? Did they work?

Therapy

When you go to a physical therapist, he/she will provide a stretching program just for you within the first few visits. Stretching is encouraged daily to help lengthen the muscles. That way, the spasticity can be decreased.

Splinting, casting, and bracing will be prescribed by an occupational therapist to help you maintain proper range of motion and stay flexible.

If these two therapies do not work adequately to control spasticity, then medication will be added to your treatment plan.

Medication

There are many drugs on the market today for muscle spasticity, however, the common drugs givien are called Zanaflex and Baclofen. These are known as muscle relaxants. They can make a person sleepy that take it. Baclofen can be taken orally or delivered by a pump that is surgically implanted. Botox can be injected locally into the muscles that tend to spasm.

Valium is another medication that may be given. It is best to take it at night to target the spasticity that occurs during sleeping hours. It helps you sleep as well, so it's perfect as a nighttime medication, especially if you have problems sleeping, like many MS patients do.

Surgery

If all else fails, surgical procedures may help the spasticity. Common procedures to help with this condition include:

- **Rhizotomy:** The surgical removal of a portion of the spinal nerve. It helps relieve pain and muscle tension.
- **Tendon release:** The surgical severing of contracted tendons near where the muscle contracture occurs.

These surgeries are done only as last resort or in severe cases that do not benefit from conservative treatments.