



How Does Multiple Sclerosis Affect Hand Function?

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MS Hands: What You Need to Know

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS) in 2008, I remember being terrified I'd lose my mobility and end up in a wheelchair. I was preoccupied with this possibility, and it never occurred to me that there would be other symptoms that, arguably, cause more problems.

My mobility issues are solved by using a scooter, and this has enabled me to stay at work or enjoy other activities such as shopping or going out with my family. As long as there are no stairs, I can join in most things, and many people stop noticing my mobility scooter.

There is no such solution for the problems with my hands though, and I would argue that MS hands cause sufferers as many, if not more problems than not being able to walk.

Because it's not immediately obvious people under-estimate the impact MS has on my hands and can be surprised when I enlighten them.

What's the Issue with MS Hands?

Both my hands are weaker than they once were, but it's especially noticeable in my right hand. Naturally, I'm right-handed, so most every-day tasks are affected.

I have constant pins and needles and numbness in my hands, which gets worse with fatigue or when it's particularly hot.

This means fine motor tasks are pretty difficult for me. I can't manage small buttons, for example, and need help most mornings doing my bra up! I have trouble with laces and shoe fastenings as well as brushing or tying up my hair.

The numbness makes it hard to feel if I'm holding something so I often drop things which can be infuriating. It's also getting more and more challenging to write as holding a pen feels heavy and cumbersome. Typing is also challenging, and I have to take numerous breaks for my hands to recover when I'm writing articles.

This impacts me a lot at work too. I take handwritten notes when interviewing my service users, and one asked me if I was using shorthand the other day as my handwriting was so illegible! I type up my notes whenever I can, but this takes double the time, so it's not always possible.

I'm forever dropping pens onto the floor and find sifting through paper files so difficult! It's as if I'm wearing boxing gloves to leaf through paper, and sometimes I feel like launching it all across the office!

Eating can also be difficult as using a knife and fork with boxing gloves on is not easy! Cutting up food requires

strength in both hands so when it's really bad, my husband helps me. I often find food falls off the fork on my way to my mouth, and I've been known to leave food before I'm full as it's all too difficult.

I always feel self-conscious when I'm eating out and use my left hand wherever possible.

What Causes Hand Problems with MS?

As with all symptoms of MS, damage to the brain, and spinal cord disrupt messages to the hands. I suffered a particularly bad relapse once and was unable to use my right hand for anything! This lasted around five weeks, and although it got much better, it's never been the same.

Neuropathic pain can cause weird sensations like numbness and pins and needles which can come and go or be omnipresent like mine!

I find my hands are much worse in the heat of the summer and repetitive tasks like writing Christmas cards or typing an article will require frequent rest as fatigue builds up.

What Can Be Done to Improve Hand Problems with MS?

As stated above, there's nothing we can put on like magic gloves to solve it, but there are things we can do to improve symptoms.

Leave plenty of time for tasks – don't try doing all your cards at once as your writing will get worse and worse!

- Exercises – You can find hand strengthening exercises on-line.
- Hand grips and "Theraputty" – Speak to your occupational therapist or neurologist as you can do hand workouts using these aids.
- Voice software – To help with typing (although I'd be self-conscious about talking to myself in the office!)
- Talk to friends, family, and employers – Explain what impact MS has on your hands and ask for help if needed.
- Rest – Most MS symptoms improve with rest, and your hands are no different.

It's important to me that I maintain as much independence as possible, so I need to make sure I keep my hands as strong as possible for as long as possible given that my legs gave up years ago!

I need my hands for holding my weight while I transfer from a chair to my scooter, for example, so need my hands to stay strong. I also drive using hand controls so I can't afford to lose any more strength.

The number of tasks we complete each day using our hands is mind-blowing, and I don't know why this didn't occur to me years ago when I was stressing out about needing a wheelchair. I hope someone comes up with magic hands to fix the problem once and for all!