

Multiple Sclerosis and Physical Therapy

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Fact Sheet

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What is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a progressive autoimmune disease that disrupts the nerves within the brain and spinal cord. Disturbance of nerve signals can cause a variety of neurologic symptoms that are highly variable from person to person depending on the location, size, and amount of areas that are disrupted. The cause of MS is not entirely known, but there is evidence that an interaction between genetics, environmental factors (low vitamin D, living farther from the equator, smoking, childhood obesity), and viral infections may be the cause.

MS is most commonly diagnosed between 20-50 years old, however, MS can occur in young children and older adults. MS is more common in females.

Symptoms of MS

Symptoms of MS are highly variable depending on the location of the brain or spinal cord that is affected. Fatigue is the most common and often the most significant symptom limiting movement. Fatigue is commonly provoked by heat, overexertion, stress, or time of day.

Below are other common symptoms that may occur with MS:

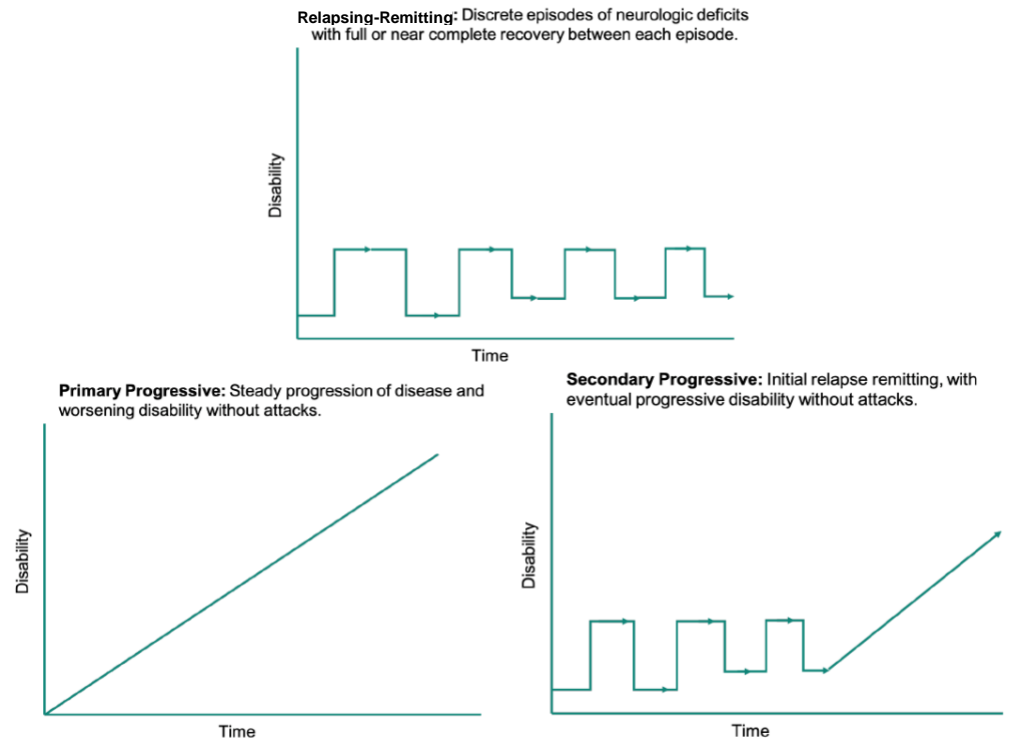
- Stiffness or muscle spasms in arms or legs
- Weakness
- Numbness or tingling
- Difficulty walking
- Pain
- Bowel and bladder changes
- Visual deficits
- Dizziness
- Balance challenges
- Emotional disturbances
- Cognitive deficits
- Difficulties with speaking or swallowing

MS and Physical Therapy

Physical therapists (PTs) are movement specialists who can play a critical role in managing mobility challenges associated with MS. PT treatment will vary depending on your specific symptoms and the severity of your symptoms. Regardless of the symptom severity there are physical therapy interventions that can be implemented throughout the disease course.

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Types of Multiple Sclerosis



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Minimal symptoms with limited impact on mobility

- Interventions to target specific impairments such as muscle strength, balance, fatigue, mobility, and flexibility deficits
- Task-specific training for improved mobility
- Promotion of health for maintaining or initiating an active lifestyle
- Education on energy conservation, exercise prescription, fatigue management, and heat sensitivity

Moderate symptoms impacting mobility

- Education and training on modifying exercise and daily tasks to promote independence and to maintain fitness
- Instruction on use of walking aides, fall prevention strategies, adaptive equipment, and caregiver training
- Education on energy conservation, exercise prescription, fatigue management, and heat sensitivity

High level of symptoms significantly impacting mobility

- Caregiver training and equipment to assist with basic mobility and positioning to prevent secondary complications associated with immobility
- Instruction on use of wheelchairs or walking aides, fall prevention strategies, adaptive equipment, and caregiver training
- Education on energy conservation, exercise prescription, wheelchair management, fatigue management, and heat sensitivity

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