

# October 2022 Newsletter



## MS and Anxiety

Everyone feels anxious at some point, but this emotion is usually short-lived and doesn't affect daily activities. Living with an unpredictable, progressive disease like MS often adds to one's anxiety level. A common fear that individuals with MS share is about the future and how they might be affected by increasing levels of disability. In

addition, MS is associated with inflammation in the brain, which has been [shown](#) to trigger anxiety and depression in those living with the disease. Some of the medications used to treat MS, such as corticosteroids, can have significant effects on the emotions. The symptoms of MS can also be triggers for those that already have anxiety, creating an emotional environment that makes apprehension far more likely and severe.



Anxiety disorders are conditions in which anxiety doesn't go away. They often worsen over time and the resulting stress can interfere with daily activities and personal relationships. There are five major types of anxiety disorders:

## Types of Anxiety Disorders

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder** - Chronic anxiety, about a wide range of situations and issues, rather than one specific event, often without provocation.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder** - Recurrent, unwanted thoughts and/or repetitive behaviors that don't help, but only make anxiety worse.

**Panic Disorder** - Unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear that occur without warning and cause physical symptoms like chest pain, sweating or shortness of breath.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** - Anxiety related to a traumatic experience that has occurred in the past. If left untreated, it can persist for many years after the event.

**Social Phobia** - An intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others in social settings. These feelings can affect work, school and other daily activities.

According to the [Anxiety & Depression Association of America](#), anxiety disorders are the most common mental illness in the United States, affecting approximately 19.1% of the population. A number of studies have looked at their prevalence in people with MS. [Canadian researchers](#) concluded that 35.7% of people with MS have some kind of an anxiety disorder, with generalized anxiety disorder (18.6%), panic disorder (10%), and obsessive compulsive disorder (8.6%) being the most common. Data showed the risk factors for anxiety were being female, a co-morbid diagnosis of depression, and limited social support. Another [study](#) from Canada found the prevalence of anxiety in people with MS was nearly 30.0%. Results showed that low education increased the odds of anxiety and affected participants reported anxiety substantially reduced their quality of life. [Investigators](#) in Australia followed 198 people with MS for two and a half years. They compared the prevalence of anxiety (44.5%), depression (18.5%) and fatigue (53.7%). Data showed these three symptoms are common in people with MS and tend to cluster together. Interestingly, the prevalence of anxiety decreased by 8.1% each year the researchers observed study participants and this



effect was more pronounced in women than men. Investigators suggest this may be due to participants having a good support system, effective MS treatment, acceptance and positive lifestyle changes following their MS diagnosis.



Anxiety is caused by the body’s [“fight-or-flight”](#) response. This is an automatic physiological reaction that enables one to respond to perceived danger or threats. When a person feels fearful or stressed, their body produces a hormone called [adrenaline](#) and this causes a myriad of both physical and psychological symptoms. Interestingly, many of the physical symptoms of anxiety are similar to those seen in

MS. An adrenaline rush can be very useful, it prepares an individual for immediate action when threatened by danger. However, if this heightened state of alertness continues for too long (which is the case with anxiety disorders), it can affect one’s health.

### Anxiety symptoms

Physical symptoms like MS symptoms:	Other physical symptoms:	Psychological symptoms:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fatigue</li><li>• Feeling faint or dizzy</li><li>• Disrupted sleep</li><li>• Bladder and bowel dysfunction</li><li>• Numbness or tingling</li><li>• Nausea</li><li>• Ringing in the ears</li><li>• Tense or trembling muscles</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Pounding heart</li><li>• Breathing difficulties</li><li>• Dry mouth</li><li>• Excessive sweating</li><li>• Restlessness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Chronic worry or guilt</li><li>• Racing thoughts</li><li>• Difficulty making decisions</li><li>• Feeling inadequate</li><li>• Inflexibility</li><li>• Hostility or anger toward others</li><li>• Repeating certain behaviors or thoughts</li></ul>

There are a number of ways to manage anxiety at home. Some people find it helpful to identify fears and write them down. This process can help break down larger problems that seem overwhelming into smaller, more manageable ones. It also helps “get them out of your head” and can make them less daunting. It’s important to be kind to yourself.

Often anxiety undermines confidence and makes you think negatively about yourself and your abilities. Try and remind yourself of your achievements and good qualities. Rather than worrying too much about tomorrow, try and live just one day at a time and focus on the present. Focused, deep breathing is another way to dispel unnecessary anxious thoughts. This slows the heart rate and promotes calmness. Something as simple as taking a bath can also be quite soothing. Practicing relaxation techniques like [meditation](#) and [mindfulness](#) may help with anxiety.

Healthy living goes a long way when it comes to easing anxiety. Getting a good night's sleep is not only a good idea in general, it may also help nerves not feel so frayed. Inactivity and a lack of mental stimulation may trigger or worsen anxiety. Keeping busy with projects and tasks is a way to prevent this. Exercise is beneficial in many ways, and also a great way of keeping spirits up and the mind active. Practicing [yoga](#) is a great way to combine exercise with mindfulness. [Research](#) shows that a wholesome diet is also



beneficial in this regard. Results show an association between less anxiety and eating more fruits and vegetables, omega-3 fatty acids and vitamin supplementation (for example, zinc, magnesium, selenium, probiotics, among others). Restricting calories and eating breakfast were shown to lower anxiety, too. Analysis revealed an association between higher levels of anxiety and a high-fat diet, eating sugar and refined carbohydrates, and “unhealthy” eating patterns like skipping meals. It’s important to avoid caffeine and alcohol as these are stimulants which can also precipitate or mimic symptoms of anxiety. People who smoke often say that it helps them cope with anxiety and stress. A [recent study](#) looked at how quitting smoking affected almost 8,000 people with MS. Results showed anxiety levels were actually higher in people who kept smoking compared to non-smokers and anxiety levels went down when people quit smoking.

Isolation and anxiety are not a good combination. Keeping in touch with other people can help ease apprehension in several ways. Being aware of issues and concerns in other people's lives can give you a sense of perspective on your own feelings. Other people may also have ideas and suggestions on how to deal with things that are worrying you. Even if people can offer no solutions, sharing a concern and



talking about how it makes you feel can be helpful. Some people consult with professionals (for example, a therapist, social worker or psychologist) to learn how to minimize the impact of anxiety and the negative thoughts and feelings it produces in their lives. These mental health professionals use several [types of therapy](#) to treat anxiety. Everyone's needs are different and finding the help that works best is important. Discussing any anxious thoughts or feelings with your doctor is a good start. He or she can help you find the best resources and make a referral to a mental health professional, if necessary. The National MS Society also provides a number of [emotional support services](#) and offers a [search tool](#) on their website that can help you find healthcare providers and other valuable resources that may be in your area.



If none of these things help, a number of medications are used to treat anxiety. [Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors](#) (SSRIs), which were designed to treat depression, are also effective for many anxiety disorders. Examples include [sertraline](#) (Zoloft), [citalopram](#) (Celexa), [escitalopram](#) (Lexapro), and [fluoxetine](#) (Prozac). In addition, [serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor](#) (SNRI) drugs like [venlafaxine](#) (Effexor) or [duloxetine hydrochloride](#) (Cymbalta) may be helpful. [Benzodiazepines](#), such as [diazepam](#) (Valium), are known for their calming properties and are used to treat anxiety on an as-needed basis. However, these drugs are habit forming and not intended for long-term use.

[Research](#) shows that anxiety disorders are common in people with MS, but they are frequently overlooked and undertreated. Emotional changes require treatment just like any of the physical symptoms of MS. Left untreated, they can affect functioning and quality of life. There are a number of approaches that can be used, including exercise, relaxation techniques, increased social support and medication. In some cases, a combination of these is most effective. There is [evidence](#) that identifying and treating anxiety early can make a big difference. It's important for anyone experiencing these troublesome symptoms to talk to their healthcare provider right away. With the right interventions, it's possible to get anxiety under control and minimize its impact on your life.

