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Myths about MS you need to stop believing

Multiple sclerosis is a neurological condition. Symptoms vary from person to person but can include visual problems, muscle spasms, pain and fatigue. We ask the experts to help clarify some of the most common misunderstandings about the disease.

It's estimated that over 100,000 people in the UK have [multiple sclerosis](#) (or MS) – a condition which affects the brain and spinal cord. Women are twice as likely to be diagnosed compared to men. Experts aren't entirely sure what causes the disease but it is likely an [autoimmune condition](#).

Patient's clinical director Sarah Jarvis explains: "MS happens when your body's immune system, which normally helps you fight off infection, turns on you and attacks the insulating sheaths around the nerves that carry messages inside, to and from your brain."

As no two cases of MS are the same, there are many misconceptions around the condition, reveals Dr Eli Silber, consultant neurologist at the Wellington Hospital in London, part of [HCA Healthcare UK](#).

"Everyone will have different experiences. The same also goes for managing the condition, both physically and mentally."

Here are some of the most common myths about MS:

MS means you shouldn't exercise

Many people think that those with MS should avoid all forms of [physical activity](#), but this a misconception.

"Moderate exercise is an essential element in maintaining general health and well-being for everyone, including people with MS. In fact, exercise can form a key part of an MS treatment plan, as it can improve mood, mobility and muscle strength, as well as some MS symptoms," Silber points out.

Although MS can lead to problems with mobility, balance, and [fatigue](#), it doesn't mean that people with the condition are unable to exercise. Exploring different options that work for the individual is important.

Most people with MS use a wheelchair

Most people with MS worry about needing to use a wheelchair at some point but the majority of people do not develop major disability, Silber explains.

"That said, no one can be certain how MS will affect each individual, and if the condition does start to affect mobility, a walking stick, crutches or wheelchair may help retain independence. Early therapy with effective drugs in people with relapsing MS is likely to prevent or delay this."

MS will stop you having children

MS does not affect fertility and many people with the condition have children. But some MS medications aren't safe for pregnancy, so always check with your doctor first.

Silber says: "People with MS and significant disability may find it more difficult to look after children, due to mobility and fatigue issues, and therefore may face some day-to-day problems, but the condition does not stop people from having children and being successful parents. I often encourage my patients who consider having a family to do so, and will recommend disease-modifying therapies that are compatible with conception."

MS is curable

Unfortunately, MS is a chronic condition and there isn't a cure at the moment - although there are [some exciting clinical trials](#) in the works. But Silber says it's still possible to manage symptoms with current treatments.

"It is important to start treating MS early, as it improves long-term health and well-being by slowing down the build-up of irreversible damage and reducing the number of relapses people experience. I have been privileged to be involved in trials of almost all the disease-modifying drugs currently available to people with MS. I am also involved in screening patients for and supporting them when receiving stem cell therapy for particularly aggressive disease."

Jarvis points out that many hospitals now have specialist MS clinics, with a team of healthcare professionals available to help with different aspects of the condition.

"Physiotherapists can help with strength and balance problems; occupational therapists with adaptations needed for the home; speech and language therapists with speech or swallowing issues; specialist nurses offer advice on medication and side effects; and counsellors can offer talking therapy."

Only older people get MS

MS is not a disease of ageing. It is in fact the most common cause of neurological disability in young adults. Most people with MS are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50. You might remember the condition being in the headlines a few years ago when Jack Osbourne was diagnosed at 26.

"Jack Osbourne being diagnosed with [multiple sclerosis](#) (MS) focused attention on the most common illness to cause major disability in young people in the UK. He was diagnosed after developing two of the most common early symptoms – loss of vision in one eye and numbness or tingling," recalls Jarvis.

MS is hereditary

There's no single gene that causes MS. Your DNA is only part of the story and just because someone in your family has MS, it doesn't mean you will definitely go on to develop the condition.

Silber says: "There is a genetic aspect to MS. Having a direct relative such as a parent or sibling with MS does significantly increase the risk of an individual developing the condition. However, this contribution is still relatively low and the risk of MS is not all in your genes. Environmental factors, such as smoking, [a lack of vitamin D](#), and [glandular fever](#), may also play a role in determining who develops MS and who doesn't."

MS is a terminal condition

MS is not a death sentence, Silber reassures. The average life expectancy of someone with MS is no different to someone without the condition.

"MS is not fatal or terminal, but if severely affected, complications from the condition can lead to higher risks of death, although this is very rare. The most common causes of death in people with MS are the same for those who do not have the condition. These include [heart disease](#), cancer and stroke."

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