



Fact Sheet

## Multiple Sclerosis Pain

### About

Pain is a common problem of patients with multiple sclerosis (MS). While pain is not an initial symptom of MS, the disease may bring about an acute pain experience, such as in painful tonic spasms or Lhermitte's sign. In other patients, pain may become chronic as a long-term result of damage to nerve root entry zones (trigeminal neuralgia) or structures in central sensory pathways. Migraine headache may develop as a consequence of MS, and headache can also be a side effect of interferon treatment.<sup>1</sup>

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Most pain in MS can be treated. But not all pain a person with MS has is due to MS. Whatever the source, pain is a complex problem that should not be ignored. Many factors may contribute, including fear and worry. A multidisciplinary pain clinic may be able to treat chronic disabling pain with medication in combination with such alternative therapies as biofeedback, hypnosis, yoga, meditation or acupuncture. Self-help may also play an important role in pain control. People who stay active and

### Facts

According to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, approximately 400,000 Americans have MS, and every week about 200 people are diagnosed. Worldwide, MS affects about 2.5 million people. Because the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) does not require U.S. physicians to report new cases, and because symptoms can be completely invisible, the numbers can only be estimated.<sup>3</sup>

In one study, 55% of the people studied had what is called “clinically significant pain” at some time during the course of a lifetime with MS. Almost half (48%) were troubled by chronic pain. This study suggested that factors such as age at onset, length of time with MS, or degree of disability played no part in distinguishing the people with pain from the people who were pain-free.<sup>4</sup>

A major study of pain in people with MS found that of those who reported mild to severe pain, almost half (49%) reported their pain as severe.<sup>4</sup>

### Prevalence of Headache



Pain, including headache, is a frequent complaint of individuals with MS. Prevalence of headache in patients with MS is estimated to be higher than 50%.<sup>6</sup>

Research has found that twice as many women as men reported pain as part of their MS, and that women report higher pain intensity than men.<sup>2,4</sup>

Pain intensity is also associated with multiple pain sites (51% of the severe pain group reported four or more pain sites), and constancy of pain (44% among the group with severe pain).

There is also a positive association with increased MS-related disability, relapsing-worsening type of MS, and depression.<sup>4</sup>

Pain reported in MS patients is most frequently neuropathic, located in limbs, and reported as severe and “burning/spiky.” The Multiple Sclerosis Society describes the most common types of pain experienced by people with MS as:<sup>2,5</sup>

#### **Trigeminal Neuralgia**

Excruciating, sharp, shock-like pain in cheek and forehead, lasting seconds to minutes; may be triggered by speaking or a touch.

#### **“Lhermitte’s sign”**

A stabbing, electric-shock-like sensation running from the back of the head down the spine, brought on by flexing the neck.

#### **Panic of Spasticity**

Brief muscle twitching or sudden, sharp muscle spasm; may also burn or tingle.

#### **Musculo-Skeletal Pain**

Caused by the physical stress of immobility.

## Additional Resources

#### **Multiple Sclerosis Foundation**

6350 North Andrews Avenue  
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33309-2130  
Phone: (888) MSFOCUS (673-6287)  
Phone: (954) 776-6805  
Fax: (954) 351-0630  
E-mail: [support@msfocus.org](mailto:support@msfocus.org)  
[www.msfocus.org](http://www.msfocus.org)

#### **National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke**

**NIH Neurological Institute**  
P.O. Box 5801  
Bethesda, MD 20824  
Phone: (301) 496-5751  
Phone: (800) 352-9424 or  
TTY: (301) 468-5981  
[www.ninds.nih.gov](http://www.ninds.nih.gov)

### **National Multiple Sclerosis Society**

733 Third Avenue  
3rd Floor  
New York, NY 10017  
Phone: (800) 344-4867  
[www.nationalmssociety.org](http://www.nationalmssociety.org)

### **TNA The Facial Pain Association (formerly the Trigeminal Neuralgia Association)**

408 W. University Avenue  
Suite 602  
Gainesville, FL 32601  
Phone: (352) 384-3600  
Toll-free: (800) 923-3608  
Fax: (352) 331-3606  
E-mail: [info@fpa-support.org](mailto:info@fpa-support.org)  
[www.endthepain.org](http://www.endthepain.org)

Resources verified July 2011.

## References

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