



Information for people living
with multiple sclerosis

Symptoms

Sensory symptoms

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Sensory symptoms

Many people living with multiple sclerosis experience sensory symptoms in their skin. It's often one of the first symptoms people notice – the severity and longevity varies from person to person. With the right information and support, sensory symptoms can be minimised or managed effectively to maintain a healthy and active lifestyle.

Multiple sclerosis and sensory symptoms

People living with multiple sclerosis often experience a change in their skin known as sensory symptoms or sometimes, altered sensations. If you've felt something in your skin that feels 'strange' and is hard to describe, you're not alone.

Some of the more common sensory symptoms include:

- Numbness
- Prickling
- Pins and needles
- Burning
- Tingling
- Tightness
- Crawling
- Itching

Some people might say:

- It's like insects crawling over me (or under my skin)
- It's like something is squeezing me really tightly
- It feels like I'm bleeding but I'm not
- It's like something lightweight brushing against my skin
- It's like a bee or wasp sting
- It feels like stabbing, electric shock, wetness, trickling or like my skin is really sensitive.

These sensations can occur in any part of the body (on one or both sides), usually the face, body, arms or legs but sometimes also the genital area. This can impact your movement or usage e.g. numb feet can affect walking and numb hands, your ability to write, dress or hold objects safely.

These uncomfortable, sensory symptoms (known as dysaesthesia, paraesthesia or allodynia depending on their impact – refer glossary, page 4) are the result of damage of the nerves caused by multiple sclerosis and so the brain can no longer interpret incoming signals. To deal with this, the brain tries to relate the signal to something the body has experienced before like being squeezed or burnt, or to something it can imagine.

Let's say the feeling's in your fingertips. While there's no damage to the hand tissues, there is damage to the nerves which report to your brain about your hand, which is why it seems like there's something wrong with your fingertips.

These odd feelings are one of the invisible symptoms of multiple sclerosis. They're difficult to explain, so people can hesitate to mention them. They are very real to the person who is experiencing them but others may be unaware. For example, you may feel itchy but without a visible rash or skin irritation. With the right advice, you can manage or reduce these symptoms. Like multiple sclerosis, sensory symptoms vary from person to person, so an individual approach is best.

Sensory symptoms

What should I do if I experience sensory symptoms?

If you have sensory symptom concerns talk to your MS nurse or GP, and at your next visit, tell your neurologist. They may ask whether:

- There is a lack of sensation, as in numbness, or a gain of new sensation, for example a burning feeling
- The sensory symptom is painful or not
- The feeling is set off by touch, heat or other triggers or just happens for no obvious reason.

Sensory symptoms may go away completely without treatment or return periodically. Persistent symptoms can be difficult to treat. If the sensation is having a major impact, your health professionals may suggest drug treatments. Otherwise, managing trigger factors or changing how you carry out daily tasks may be helpful.

What can I do to manage these symptoms?

Treatments

Medication may be available. Talk to your GP or neurologist about the symptom and impact.

Not all sensory symptoms will be treated, for example, numbness and loss of sensation may not be treated unless they are causing particular distress.

Occupational therapy

If sensory symptoms are interfering with your daily activities, an occupational therapist may be able to provide equipment or other suggestions. This is particularly true for numbness, for example:

- Numbness in the feet can cause difficulty walking as it is hard to feel the floor. This could increase the risk of falls.
- Numb hands may make it difficult to write, dress or hold a cup, knife or other object safely.
- Severe numbness in the face can increase the risk of biting the inside of the mouth or tongue while eating or chewing.



- Numbness in any part of the body can increase the risk of burning yourself without realising, so it may be important to take care around hot water, fires and other sources of heat.

There are things that can be done to help, so speak with a member of your healthcare team about tailored options to improve your individual situation.

Sensory symptoms



Cold packs may help in managing some sensory symptoms

How can I manage sensory symptoms myself?

- **Triggers** If your sensory symptom is triggered by e.g. touch, heat or wind, you could try avoiding or minimising the trigger. Wearing looser clothing or a scarf, or applying a cool pack may help.
- **Change your habits** A different style of pen, cup or knife may be easier to hold. A more upright, supportive chair may help. Think carefully about why you do something the way that you do – it can be surprising how often it's just out of habit. Challenge yourself to come up with new and easier ways of doing things. Ask family, friends and colleagues to work with you so that they understand how these changes will help you.
- **Sexual issues** Numbness or reduced sensation can affect the genital area for both men and women with MS and usually pleasurable sensations can be diminished or become uncomfortable. Discuss this with your partner or, for a tailored plan, a member of your healthcare team.
- **Other options** Many of the tips for managing pain also help with sensory symptoms. They include using heat, cold or relaxation techniques as well as keeping positive and sharing your thoughts about your symptoms and their impact.

Everyone is different so you may need to try a range of different options (or several at once) before you find what works best for you.

Glossary

Allodynia Where something, like a light touch, feels painful even though it shouldn't cause pain.

Paraesthesia Annoying unusual sensations, like tingling or numbness, which may be triggered or just happen spontaneously.

Dysaesthesia More intense, sometimes painful, feeling which happens spontaneously.

Sensory symptoms Another term for altered sensations.

Sensory symptoms

General information and assistance

There is support available to help you manage your multiple sclerosis:

- Your GP should be the first contact for any new and/or persistent ataxia or tremor concerns. MS nurses and other healthcare advisers can also help you to manage these symptoms on an ongoing basis.
- Contact your state MS organisation (details below) to access services such as MS nurses, peer support and other resources.
- Speak to your neurologist and other healthcare providers about the best approach to treatment management for your individual circumstances.
- For information about multiple sclerosis and multiple sclerosis treatments, visit www.ms.org.au

State MS organisations

MS Connect (Victoria, NSW, ACT and Tasmania)



1800 042 138
msconnect@ms.org.au
www.ms.org.au

MS Society SA & NT (South Australia and NT)



1800 812 311
msassist@ms.asn.au
www.ms.asn.au

MSWA (Western Australia)



1300 097 989
communications@mswa.org.au
www.mswa.org.au

MS Queensland



1800 177 591
info@msqld.org.au
www.msqld.org.au

The following support services may be able to provide wellbeing or other advice

- **Carers Australia**
1800 242 636
www.carersaustralia.com.au
 Information and advice to carers, their friends and families about carer support and services.
- **Independent Living Centres Australia**
1300 885 886
www.ilcaustralia.org.au
 Information about products and services to help people remain independent and improve their quality of life.

Sources

This fact sheet comprises material from previously published Australian MS organisation leaflets plus Multiple Sclerosis (MS) UK Trust and Continenence Foundation of Australia online resources (and associated references), and has been endorsed by both a medical expert and a person living with multiple sclerosis.

Disclaimer

Information prepared by MS Australia. It is intended to provide useful and accurate information of a general nature and is not a substitute for medical advice.