

Walking (Gait) Difficulties in MS

Walking may be impaired by MS, but mobility doesn't have to be. The goal of treatment is to keep you as active and independent as possible. This is done by addressing any symptoms that interfere with your walking.

Factors that can interfere with walking

- **Weakness** can result from deconditioning or from damage to the nerves in the central nervous system (CNS) that stimulate the muscles in the legs.
- **Fatigue** can make it difficult for people to walk far or for long.
- **Spasticity (stiffness and/or spasms)** can be painful and make legs feel heavy and difficult to move.
- **Pain**, related to nerves or muscles, can cause limitations with walking.
- **Dizziness (light-headedness)** and **vertigo (a sensation of the world spinning)** make it uncomfortable and unsafe to move around.
- **Sensory changes (numbness, pins-and-needles)** in the legs or feet can be uncomfortable and make it difficult to feel the ground.
- **Balance problems** can make it hard to walk steadily without falling.
- **Vision problems** are common and varied in MS, from double-vision to blurred vision to vision that feels jumpy – any of which can interfere with walking around safely.

Treatment and self-management strategies

Walking is a complex activity that can be affected in a variety of ways in people living with MS. Neurologists, neuro-ophthalmologists, and physical therapists have the expertise to identify and address many of these problems with medication and/or rehabilitation strategies including:

- Physical therapy and gait/balance training.
- Appropriate mobility aids.
- Medications for spasticity, fatigue, and walking speed.
- Practices to reduce your risk of falling:
 - Wearing safe, low-heeled shoes.
 - Being conscious of where you are walking (avoiding ice, slippery surfaces).

- Making your home safe, keeping the areas where you walk clear. Move electric cords out of the way. Tack down (or remove) loose carpets/rugs by applying no-slip strips to tile and wooden floors.

Mobility aids

Mobility aids are the key to remaining active, safe, and independent when walking independently is no longer easy or practical. Mobility aids include:

- **Canes**, including those with a base and multiple legs for greater stability.
- **Forearm crutches or hiking poles** that provide extra sensory input, stability, and support.
- **Wheeled walkers**, including those with seats for easy “rest stops”.
- **Motorized scooters**, primarily for individuals who can walk and balance but want to conserve energy.
- **Manual wheelchairs** that allow a person to move independently or with assistance.
- **Power wheelchairs** that are custom-made to meet a person’s needs (for example, with different steering options, head supports, cushions).

There are a range of options to enhance mobility. Different interventions and devices work for different people and different activities. A rehabilitation evaluation with a physical and/or occupational therapist is the best first step in determining what might work best for you.