

Cognitive problems

Because MS can affect any part of the brain, it can cause problems with what we call 'thinking': memory, planning, foresight and judgement. Minor difficulties are common and affect many of those with MS. Usually the signs are subtle and affect abstract thinking, memory, attention, word finding or handling information. There may be problems with retrieving memories, reasoning and concentration. Those with minor problems may be aware of them but in severe cases there may be no insight into the situation.

Tips for dealing with cognitive problems

Some people with MS experience cognitive changes in varying levels. In most cases, there are ways to treat or manage these changes. Certain techniques can help you jog your memory and compensate for cognitive difficulties. If you are experiencing memory lapses or forgetfulness, some basic tips can help you stay organised and focused:

Research has shown that MS can affect cognition - the mind's ability to store, organise and recall information. Fortunately, cognitive problems caused by MS don't necessarily worsen over time. If you are experiencing memory lapses or forgetfulness, some basic tips can help you stay organised and focused:

- Be patient
- Substitute organisation for memory. Get a loose-leaf organiser and learn to use it as your information centre. Set up sections for appointments, to-do's, phone numbers, driving directions - anything that you are likely to forget. Some people like to use electronic personal organisers, which you can carry wherever you go
- Visit your library or bookstore for books on improving organisation or improving memory
- When you are trying to learn something new, give yourself extra time to practice
- Set up a calendar to track family members' appointments, and refer to it daily
- Use a wristwatch, cell phone or personal organiser with a beeper to remind you of events. People who must take medication at certain intervals find this especially useful
- Set up a particular place for storing frequently used items such as your car keys
- Make sure every household item has a set storage space and that family members use them
- Be aware of your focus and concentration. Sometimes we forget things because we never really learned them. Often we only half pay attention. Improving your concentration can improve your recall
- Plan your most challenging intellectual tasks for your best time of day (i.e., are you a morning person or a night owl?). Scheduled rest periods will also help you avoid what researchers call cognitive fatigue
- When you meet a new person, jot down his or her name as soon as you can. Later, record notes in your loose-leaf organiser about the most striking things about that person
- When you're having trouble coming up with the right word or phrase, don't persist in trying to find that elusive word. Try to shift your attention to something else. The word you want may come back to you later
- Try to stay calm when your memory fails. It's normal to feel tense or frustrated when you forget or lose something, so take a few moments to calm down. Your memory will usually clear
- Maintain your sense of humour

If you think MS is affecting your cognition, talk over your concerns with your physician or nurse, or share your feelings with family members, a well partner or a close friend. You may want to attend an MS support groups or educational meetings; cognitive dysfunction is often a topic of discussion in these settings.

Reference

Schapiro R. Symptom Management in Multiple Sclerosis. Demos Medical Publishing Co, New York 1998:103-105.