

M.S. – Multiple Sclerosis



Definition of a Disability

The Equality Act (2010) replaced the Disability Discrimination Act (2005) in providing protection and legal rights for disabled people. It uses the following definition of disability:

“The Act defines a disability as a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term (i.e. has lasted or is likely to last for at least twelve months) adverse effect on a person’s ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.”

More information on the Act can be found at

http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/RightsAndObligations/DisabilityRights/DG_4001068

M.S. is included in this DDA definition regardless of the severity of the symptoms and stage of the condition.

▶ Multiple Sclerosis as a Disability

M.S. is a chronic fluctuating illness affecting different parts of the body. As described by the MS Society:

“Multiple Sclerosis is the most common disabling neurological condition affecting young adults. Around 85,000 people in the UK have MS.

MS is the result of damage to the myelin – a protective sheath surrounding nerve fibres of the central nervous system. When myelin is damaged, this interferes with messages between the brain and other parts of the body.

For some people, MS is characterised by periods of relapse and remission while for others it has a progressive pattern. For everyone, it makes life unpredictable.”

This unpredictability can be one of the most difficult aspects of MS to live with. There are a number of symptoms associated with MS. Most people do not experience all of them, but a collection of some of the symptoms.

The main symptoms are:

- Fatigue- debilitating and out of proportion to activity
- Visual disturbances - blurred or double vision, permanent or transient loss of vision or colour, blind spots, pains behind or in the eyes, jerking eyes
- Altered sensations - pins and needles, numbness, tingling, itching or a burning feeling
- Bladder and bowel problems - Frequency and/or Urgency when passing water, incomplete emptying or urinary incontinence. Also constipation, a slower digestive system, and bowel incontinence.
- Cognitive difficulties – short- term memory problems, concentration problems, reasoning and judgement problems, mood swings, untypical emotional outbursts, impaired ability to learn
- Speech or swallowing difficulties
- Muscle spasm, weakness, loss of coordination, unstable walking, clumsiness
- Loss of Balance, dizziness, vertigo, tremor

MS is classified as:

relapsing/remitting, where periods of illness are followed by periods of being well, when the body may repair itself, either partially or fully

progressive, where there is a gradual increase in a disabling condition

Both classifications of MS can vary greatly between people. Some may experience only a small number of relapses and then be well, while others have more frequent and debilitating relapses.

▶ Treatment

Medical help

Some drugs can treat particular symptoms of MS or be helpful for particular types of MS. Check with your GP or hospital specialist whether anything available could be helpful for you.

You may also be able to access services such as Occupational Therapy through your GP.

Physiotherapy

This can help mitigate the effects of muscle stiffness and can help with any effects on the muscles of reduced activity (e.g. because walking is restricted).

Complementary therapies

The MS Society publishes information about complementary therapies on their website.

► Strategies for dealing with M.S.

Pacing Activities

If you have trouble with fatigue, learn to manage your activity and energy levels. Pacing involves both brain and muscle power, incorporating cognitive activities (such as reading and speaking), physical activities (such as walking) and emotions (overcoming negative thoughts is very important). Pacing should involve focusing on very simple daily activities to begin with, such as writing a letter or phoning a friend. All activities should be timetabled, and it helps to keep a diary of your progress. The key to pacing activities is time – take plenty of rests at every stage. This will help avoid great swings in energy levels.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

This can help with managing any emotional problems. If you are experiencing these either as a direct symptom of MS, or simply struggling to come to terms with the fluctuating nature of the condition, it can provide valuable psychological support, helping to overcome a negative attitude and state of mind.

Counselling

It can be helpful talking to someone about any problems that you are experiencing in coping with your condition. Counselling can be accessed through the University's Student Counselling Service or via your GP.

Diet

Some schools of thought (usually complementary therapies) postulate that people with M.S. find that a change in diet can help reduce some of

their symptoms. However, you must try to maintain as balanced a diet as possible. The best person to advise you is your G.P, a specialist or a dietician.

Local support networks

There are a number of support services and groups in the area. A good place to find out more about what is available locally is the MS Therapy Centre. The two closest centres are at Abingdon and Reading (contact numbers below).

Study Strategies

As a student at Oxford, you are likely to have a demanding workload and busy timetable. It is therefore extremely important that you prioritise your work, and let your tutors and college know about your condition.

Support options:

Support worker. This is someone who assists you with study related needs, such as note taking, photocopying, note transcription or help with getting books from the library

Mentor: This is someone who can help you plan, prioritise, and help you manage your workload effectively; balancing your health needs with your academic study needs.

Contact your library to ask about extended loans

Speak to your tutors about deadlines for essays. You may also be eligible for extra time in exams.

Technology, such as voice recognition software can help, particularly if you are fatigued.

Course extensions are sometimes possible. Information on this and other course adjustments can be found at www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das, or ask the disability office for a copy of "Adjustments in Course and Examination Arrangements For Students With Disabilities: Notes of Guidance".

▶ Examinations

Information about applying for special exam arrangements can be found at: www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das/exams

Requests for examination concessions must be applied for via the college office.

▶ Financial Assistance

Information about applying for funding can be found at: www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das/funding

Disability Living Allowance is not related to study needs but can be accessed if you meet certain criteria. There is a care component and a mobility component to DLA. You need to apply for this through the Department for Work and Pensions. Contact details are below.

▶ Useful Contacts

The Disability Office (details below).

Oxford University Student Union (OUSU)

Thomas Hull House, New Inn Hall Street, Oxford, OX1 2HU.

Vice-President – Welfare:

Tel: 01864 (2) 88466. Email: welfare@ousu.org

Web: www.ousu.org/welfare

OUSU has an active Disabilities Action Group, which works to raise awareness of disability issues in the University.

Oxford University Student Counselling Service

11 Wellington Square, Oxford

Tel No: (01865)270300

Email: reception@counserv.ox.ac.uk

web: www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/counselling

MS Therapy Centre, Abingdon

MS Therapy Centre Oxford Ltd, 37E Milton Trad Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RT

Tel No: 01235 832023

web: www.msrc.co.uk/index.cfm/fuseaction/show/pageid/258

Berkshire MS Therapy Centre

Bradbury House, 23a August End, Brock Gardens, Reading, Berkshire, RG30 2JP

Tel No: 0118 901 6000

web: www.bmstc.org

John Radcliffe Hospital Neurology Dept (including MS nurses)

JR Hospital, Dept of Neurology, L3 West Wing, Headley Way, Oxford, OX3 9DU.

MS nurses: 01865 234461 (answerphone)

Dept for Work and Pensions (DLA)

Tel: 0800 88 22 00

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople/FinancialSupport/DG_10011731

Shopmobility

Level 1b, Westgate Car Park, Oxford

Tel No: (01865) 248737

web: www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decC/Shopmobility_occw.htm

Oxford City Council (for Blue Badge parking permits)

Access Team, PO Box 780, Oxford, OX1 9GX, Tel: 0845 050 7666

Information on public conveniences in Oxford City:

www.oxford.gov.uk/PageRender/decER/2_Public_Toilets_occw.htm

NHS online

www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

MS Society

www.mssociety.org.uk

Disability Advisory Service

E-mail: disability@admin.ox.ac.uk

Website: www.ox.ac.uk/students/shw/das

Tel: +44 (0)1865 280 459

Fax: +44 (0)1865 289 830