

Choices

Speech and swallowing



Multiple sclerosis information

Welcome to this Choices booklet about speech and swallowing...

MS-UK believes in listening to the voices of people affected by multiple sclerosis (MS) to shape the information and support we provide. It is these people that bring us perspectives that no one else can give.

For every Choices booklet we produce, MS-UK consults the wider MS community to gather feedback and uses this to inform our content. All our Choices booklets are then reviewed by the MS-UK Virtual Insight Panel before they are published.

This Choices booklet has been designed with you in mind. We hope it will answer some of your questions and also provide some first-hand experience from those who have been in your position - people who can truly understand and empathise with your current thoughts and feelings.

Every time you find bold text with quotation marks like this, it is a quote directly from someone affected by multiple sclerosis

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Why does MS cause speech problems?

Problems with speech are a common symptom of MS, affecting approximately 40 to 50 per cent of people in the MS community (1). Difficulties with speech can result when lesions occur in the areas of the brain that facilitate and control it. In addition, fatigue can affect the voice, making it very weak, especially towards the end of the day when you are tired or during periods of relapse.



My speech is a lot slower and I find it difficult to ‘find’ the vocabulary that I want at the time I want it



In this booklet we take a look at the most common changes in speech and communication that can be experienced by people with MS. These are listed below.

Dysarthria

This is the medical term for weaknesses in the muscles which then cause problems with speech (2). It is considered the most common communication disorder for people with MS. Dysarthria is caused by neuromuscular impairment, which results in disturbances in motor control of the parts of the body which control speech. For example, damage in one part of the brain might affect the muscles of the tongue and lips, making it difficult to pronounce precise sounds,

making speech sound slurred and unclear. Damage in another area might weaken the diaphragm, affecting breath control and volume.

Dysphonia

This voice disorder often accompanies dysarthria because the same muscles, structures and neural pathways are used for both speech and voice production. Dysphonia affects voice quality, nasal resonance, pitch control, loudness, and emphasis.



My speech is mainly affected when fatigue is high. It starts with slurring and then moves on to full aphasia with the inability to form words or sentences



Dysphasia

This is a language disorder characterised by difficulty in finding the right words or forming sentences. Dysphasia in MS is usually experienced by the inability to find the correct words when they are needed at a particular moment, rather than the permanent loss of knowledge and understanding of language. This is known as ‘expressive dysphasia’.

There are other forms of dysphasia which can be experienced, such as ‘receptive dysphasia which is where words are used

and sentences formed that make sense to the person affected, but do not necessarily make sense to others (3).

Sometimes when I speak words just do not come out properly

In summary, the changes MS can cause to your speech include

- Slurred, imprecise or slower speech
- Low-volume, weak or altered voice
- Difficulty with resonance and pitch control
- Long pauses between words or between syllables
- Temporary difficulty finding the right words when speaking to others

Medications

Medications may worsen or trigger speech and language problems. Some medications cause dry mouth, which can make it hard to speak and swallow (4). There are also medications which cause muscle weakness, reduce alertness, or bring on fatigue, all of which can impact a person's ability to communicate (5).

Speak to your GP or pharmacist if you are concerned that any medications you take regularly may be impacting you in this way.



My voice is quieter, hoarse and often has no power. It is a great effort to produce sound when this happens



Treatments for speech problems

Communication problems may affect your relationships with family and friends and can make social situations challenging. Failing to speak clearly or make yourself understood can have a huge impact on your self-confidence and quality of life. However, a speech and language therapist can offer you help. They will devise strategies and exercises to help you cope with your speech problems by achieving more control over how you form words and sentences. Techniques may include

- How to strengthen the muscles you use when you talk
- The importance of good posture
- Clear articulation
- Managing the speed at which you talk
- Making the most of intonation and emphasis
- Avoiding overexertion
- Avoiding speech when there is a lot of background noise

A referral to a speech and language therapist can be made by your MS nurse, GP, member of your neurology support team, or a social care professional such as a social worker.



I use a Voice Amplifier which I have found very helpful in reducing the effort I need to use to adequately communicate. This in turn has increased my confidence, independence, and self-esteem



Self-management tips

If you are having problems with your speech you may find the following tips helpful.

- Take a good breath before you start speaking
- If you are relaxed your speech will be easier and both you and the person you are communicating with will find it a less stressful experience
- Speak slowly, saying one word at a time if necessary, leaving a clear space between words - repeat yourself if needed
- Put extra effort into stressing keywords
- Keep sentences short and avoid long conversations if you're feeling tired

- Make sure you're in the same room as the person you're talking to and face them
- Attract the listener's attention – for example, by touching or calling their name before you begin talking to them
- Non-verbal communication will help people understand you. Your body language, physical gestures and even raised eyebrows can help get your message across and aid communicating
- Reduce background noise – for example, switch off the TV or radio, this can aid concentration

Why does MS cause swallowing difficulties?

Swallowing is such an automatic response that we give it little thought unless it starts to become a problem. The medical term for swallowing difficulties is dysphagia. Studies show that more than one-third of people with MS have some degree of difficulty swallowing (6). This is due to myelin damage in the part of the brain that controls the swallowing mechanism or in the nerves connected to it.

Learn what your problem foods are and plan for them by eating extra-slowly and having very small portions

What happens when we swallow?

We use around 50 pairs of muscles and several nerves to swallow safely. To do so certain functions of the body are used, all of which can be affected by MS. Motor activities regulate the muscles responsible for the physical movement of food, sensory functions detect the presence and properties of food or liquid to trigger the swallowing process. Coordination and autonomic functions also help to control vital muscle movements which are essential elements of the swallowing process.

Swallowing stages

Swallowing is a complex but rapid process that happens in three phases, known as oral, pharyngeal and oesophageal (7).

Oral phase

This initial phase begins when food is placed into the mouth. When chewing starts, saliva mixes with the food and it is moved around the mouth by the tongue and jaw. This process makes the food the right size and texture to swallow. The tongue and other muscles propel the food towards the back of the mouth in a front-to-back squeezing action. At this point, sensory receptors are activated to start the next phase of the swallowing process.

Pharyngeal phase

In this second phase several things are all happening at once. As food enters the upper portion of the throat, the pharynx, the soft palate rises to make sure food does not enter the nose. The larynx then elevates and moves forward which allows the epiglottis to drop down and cover the trachea, commonly known as the windpipe. This prevents food from entering the airway and the lungs. Food is then propelled down the throat and into the oesophagus, which

is the tube that carries food and liquid to the stomach. During the pharyngeal phase breathing pauses temporarily.

Oesophageal phase

In this final phase of the swallowing process a number of motor contractions occur to move the food down the oesophagus. As it moves through the lower oesophageal sphincter opens, allowing the food or liquid to pass into the stomach.

This whole swallowing process takes just seconds but can easily be impacted if just one of those phases is affected.

What problems could you experience with swallowing?

Some of the problems that are caused by swallowing difficulties include (7)

- Coughing and choking when eating or drinking
- A slowed or delayed swallow
- Difficulty chewing food or controlling liquids in your mouth
- A build-up of excess saliva which may cause you to dribble
- A sensation that food or tablets are 'stuck' in the throat
- Bringing food back up, sometimes through the nose
- Aspiration, which is when food goes down the windpipe and into the lungs
- Chest/lung infections such as aspiration pneumonia
- Weight loss due to eating less and limiting what you eat
- Dehydration due to insufficient fluid intake
- A weakening or softening of the voice

Treatments for swallowing problems

Early detection and appropriate treatment can help with managing swallowing difficulties. It is important to be aware of the nature of swallowing difficulties and how they can affect anyone with MS.

If you are seeking the support of health professionals, depending on your needs, there may be a multidisciplinary approach taken to support speech and swallowing difficulties. This means that there will likely be many professionals involved in assessing and addressing your speech and swallowing issues. Below is a list of some of the health professionals who may be involved and their roles

I relapsed a long time ago and my swallowing became a problem. I was seen by a speech therapist who gave me mouth exercises. This solved the problem. I still get the odd problem. I just ensure I eat my food slowly and don't rush it

- A speech and language therapist's job is to help deal with problems related to communicating, eating, drinking and swallowing

- A dietician's role may be to advise on the types of food that are likely to be easy to swallow and to ensure that you are getting good levels of nutrition. A dietician may also give you advice on thickening drinks or blended foods
- A radiologist may be involved in completing a video-fluoroscopy, which takes a moving X-ray and can verify the exact nature and location of your swallowing problem

Often the perception of speech and language therapists is that they are only in place to help with talking, but this is not the case. Speech and language therapists are trained professionals in all aspects of communication and swallowing. They are often the key health professional to work with if there is an issue with speech or swallowing. You may be seen in your own home or a clinic depending on services in your area (8).

If swallowing problems become prolonged and an ongoing issue that could potentially put you at risk, nutrition can be provided through a procedure called a 'percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy' (PEG). This is sometimes offered for those with more severe swallowing difficulties and involves a tube being inserted through the abdomen directly into your stomach, bypassing the part of the swallowing mechanism that is not working effectively. Family carers or paid carers can be trained to use a PEG feeding system and should be taught to do so by the health professionals involved.

It is recommended that first aid treatment should be learned by you and your family carers if you are concerned about the risk of choking.

More information

The Red Cross and St John Ambulance services offer free or discounted first aid training courses to individuals and groups. The University of Glasgow also offers a free online basic first aid course which includes how to help someone who is choking. Find out more on their websites.

Red Cross - www.redcross.org.uk/get-involved/teaching-resources/community-education-workshops/first-aid-workshop-for-adults

St John Ambulance - www.sja.org.uk/first-aid-awareness-sessions

University of Glasgow, Basic First Aid - <https://www.gla.ac.uk/study/free-online-courses/basic-first-aid/>



Swallowing and choking can be avoided by very careful food preparation, as well as eating slowly with concentration



Self-management tips

If you are having problems with swallowing you may find the following tips helpful

- Avoid rushing your meals
- Ensure food is cut into bite-sized pieces and chew thoroughly
- Try not to eat when fatigued
- Tuck your chin when you swallow, even a centimetre or so will help close the airways

- Take sips of liquid with solid food to moisten it and avoid speaking whilst you are eating
- Introduce softer foods into your diet or liquidise some of your food
- Be aware of your environment and don't have too many distractions when eating
- Remain upright for at least 30 minutes after your meal
- Posture is very important, and you can sometimes get support and advice on this from a physiotherapist via the NHS, privately or at your local MS therapy centre

If you are experiencing any difficulties with your speech and swallowing, speak to your MS team or GP for further support.

Further information

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

The RCSLT provide essential guidance to help you find a speech and language therapist via the NHS or privately.

www.rcslt.org/speech-and-language-therapy/how-to-find-a-speech-and-language-therapist

Neuro Therapy Network (NTN)

There are over 50 neuro therapy centres scattered across the UK. Each of these are individual, independent charities and offer a variety of supportive services, including access to a physiotherapist. Find your local centre via the network website.

www.neurotherapynetwork.org.uk/

About MS-UK

MS-UK is a national charity supporting anyone affected by multiple sclerosis. Our hope for the future is a world where people affected by MS live healthier and happier lives.

MS-UK has always been at the forefront of promoting choice, of providing people with all the information and support they need to live life as they wish to with MS, whether that be through drugs, complementary therapies, lifestyle changes, a mixture of these or none at all.

We will always respect people's rights to make informed decisions for themselves.

The MS-UK Helpline

We believe that nobody should face multiple sclerosis alone and our helpline staff are here to support you every step of the way.

Our service is informed by the lived experience of real people living with MS, so we can discuss any treatments and lifestyle choices that are of benefit, whether they are clinically evidenced or not.



New Pathways

Our bi-monthly magazine, New Pathways, is full of the latest MS news regarding trials, drug development and research as well as competitions, special offers and product reviews. The magazine connects you to thousands of other people living with MS across the country.

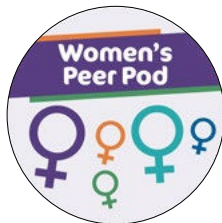
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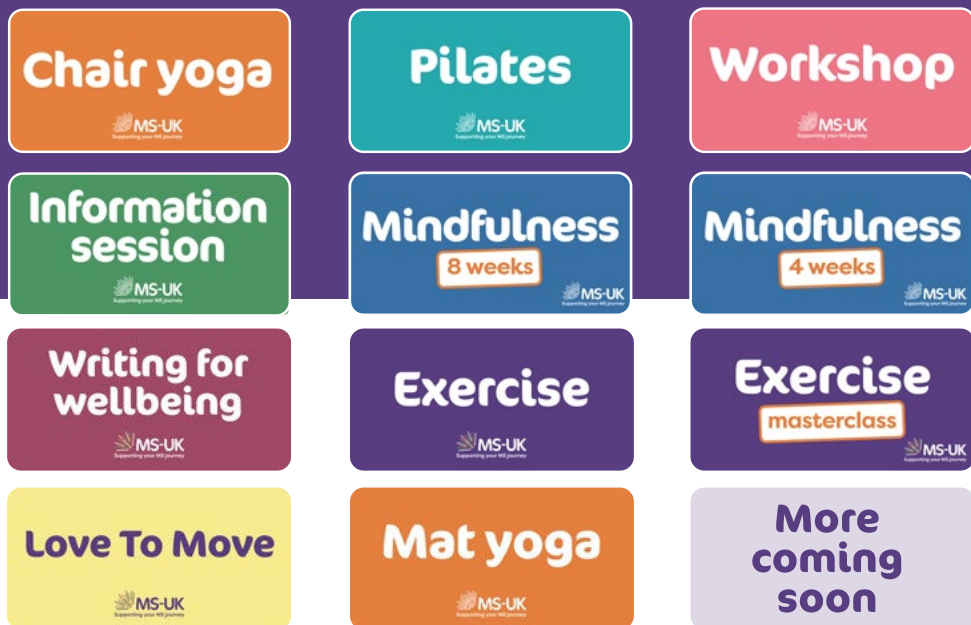
Visit [ms-uk.org/new-pathways-magazine](https://www.ms-uk.org/new-pathways-magazine)

About MS-UK

Peer support service

Our peer support service enables people to connect with others in a safe space and share experiences on topics of interest. Our Peer Pods take place regularly and are all volunteer led. Please visit the website to find out more [ms-uk.org/peer-support-service](https://www.ms-uk.org/peer-support-service) or email peersupport@ms-uk.org.





MS-UK's online activities

MS-UK offers a variety of online activities for those affected by MS to stay active, connected with others and to manage their symptoms to live happier and healthier lives. Activities include exercise sessions, mindfulness courses, chair yoga classes, information sessions and workshops. To get involved, please go to www.ms-uk.org or email register@ms-uk.org.

MS-UK E-learning

Do you work with or support someone living with MS and want to increase your understanding and knowledge of this long-term health condition? Professionals at MS-UK have created an accredited eLearning course that can help you do this. Visit www.ms-uk.org/ms-awareness-e-learning to find out more.

Sources

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MS-UK

www.ms-uk.org
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Check out MS-UK's online activities

Live a happier and healthier life with MS



- ✓ Accessible online exercise classes
- ✓ Chair yoga classes
- ✓ Mindfulness courses

- ✓ Interactive workshops
- ✓ Information sessions
- ✓ Peer Support Service

Don't miss out – sign up for our new online activities today!

Visit www.ms-uk.org or contact us at register@ms-uk.org

 **MS-UK**
Supporting your MS journey

Registered charity number 1033731

Stay in touch

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