

VISUAL DISTURBANCES

Visual problems are a common symptom amongst people with MS.

There are generally three main types of Visual Disturbances in MS; however there are also several minor ones as well. The three main types are ***Optic Neuritis***, ***Nystagmus*** and ***Diplopia*** (double vision).

Some people may also experience temporary blurring of vision, temporary loss of vision, pain with eye movement, blind spots and double vision.

Often a vision problem is the first symptom. Optic Neuritis is the most common of symptoms associated with MS.

Optic Neuritis

Optic Neuritis is inflammation of the optic nerve, the nerve that transmits visual information to the brain. It is a variable condition in which vision can be severely or moderately affected. It can either affect one only or both eyes concurrently or at different times and is usually reversible, with in some cases spontaneous recovery occurring.

Some of the symptoms of Optic Neuritis are:

- Blurring of vision
- Eye pain
- Reduced colour vision
- Visual flashing

An attack of ON can sometimes be accompanied by pain on moving the eyes. An attack usually subsides and vision should return to normal within 6 weeks. However if the nerve fibres are damaged by demyelination and attacks are recurrent, this may lead to permanent loss of visual acuity (acuteness or clearness of vision).

"My MS started with optic neuritis and I have experienced various bouts of blurring and odd visual effects (flashing lights, etc) ever since."

The most common form of treatment for ON is a course of intravenous steroids. This has been shown to speed up recovery and reduce inflammation.

Certain supplements and alternative remedies have been found to be helpful:

Vitamin D, Bromelain, Blueberries, Devil's Claw amongst others. Homeopathic remedies such as Phosphorus have also been used.

According to a recent short survey, our subscribers have also tried Acupuncture and Cranial Sacral Therapy which gave short term relief.

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These are not proven treatments for ON but have been used by people with MS who found benefit from them.

Nystagmus

Nystagmus is a condition in which the eyes move involuntarily. The movement is usually horizontal but it can also be vertical or rotary. In almost all cases, both eyes move together. More often than not the person with MS is unaware that this is happening but it is clearly seen by a doctor or optician. To others it resembles the eye movements of someone looking at the scenery from the window of a moving vehicle.

If the nystagmus continues for a period of time it can cause dizziness and nausea and loss of balance.

"I go through periods of not being able to read because I can't follow the words though a coloured perspex overlay helps with this."

Although nystagmus is quite a common symptom, it can be a difficult symptom to treat. If it interferes enough with daily life then drug therapy can help and very recently the use of a muscle relaxant injection (Botox) into the eye muscles has been shown to be effective. (The effects of this only last three to four months and require injection into the ocular muscles under general anaesthesia) Apart from immunomodulating drugs and steroids, there are no other treatments for nystagmus.

Diplopia

This can be a very early symptom of MS without people realising it. It is caused when the pair of muscles that control a particular eye movement become weak. The muscles then become uncoordinated. This disturbs vision by producing images in double. It may also cause loss of balance because spatial orientation is disturbed.

The sudden onset of double vision, poor contrast, eye pain or heavy blurring can be frightening. Fortunately, the prognosis for recovery from many vision problems associated with MS is good.

"I have had severe double vision. It lasts for up to 6 months when it strikes. I experience blurring especially when I am tired or anxious"

It is re-assuring to remember that double vision is temporary. It can be increased by fatigue or over usage of the eyes. For example too much time spent on a computer or reading for a length of time. Resting the eyes periodically throughout the day can be beneficial.

There are a few ways in which people deal with double vision. In some cases an optician may prescribe glasses with prisms to help realign the image. Some people find simply wearing a patch helps to block out one of the images. This is not recommended for long periods but useful for driving and performing short tasks.

"I have had blurring and interrupted vision. The eyes seem to flicker. Happens sometimes when I watch television"

As previously mentioned, a number of people have tried Acupuncture for relief of vision problems and found it to be quite helpful. This is obviously not a cure as with any other complementary or alternative therapy but can help relieve the symptom to a degree.

If you experience any ongoing visual disturbances it is always best to contact your MS Nurse or GP.

Useful organisations for people experiencing Visual Disturbances:

RNIB – Royal National Institute of the Blind

105 Judd Street

London

WC1H 9NE

Helpline: 0303 123 9999 - Monday to Friday 9.00am - 5.00pm

Website: www.rnib.org.uk

The Nystagmus Network

A website packed with information about nystagmus; including personal experiences.

Website: www.nystagmusnet.org