

# How age, MS and other conditions can affect your health

As you get older, your body and brain health will change. Some of these changes may overlap with your MS symptoms. You might also get symptoms from other health conditions.

**In this booklet, we look at:**

**Overlapping symptoms of getting older and MS**

**Common health conditions in older people**

**How other conditions might affect your MS and treatment options**



**Living well with MS as you grow older**

[www.msif.org/resource/living-well-with-ms-as-you-grow-older/](http://www.msif.org/resource/living-well-with-ms-as-you-grow-older/)

## How our bodies change with age

As we get older, our bodies change in many ways. For example, our muscles become weaker, we may tire more easily, our cognitive abilities (thinking, learning and memory) can decline, bladder control can weaken and vision can change. If you have MS, some of these changes may sound familiar because the condition can affect these aspects of your health too.

This overlap can make it hard to know whether problems you're experiencing are related to your MS, are signs of growing older or both. We show examples of this overlap on the next page.



Image Source: Ageing Better

## Overlaps between of the effects of age and MS

	Older Age	MS
<b>Energy levels</b>	Tiring more easily	Fatigue
<b>Movement</b>	Reduced muscle tone, strength, and flexibility, slower movement, an increased risk of falls	Reduced mobility, strength, coordination and balance, an increased risk of falls, speech difficulties
<b>Bladder</b>	Greater urgency and frequency of urination, reduced bladder control, more frequent infections	Greater urgency and frequency of urination, reduced bladder control, more frequent infections
<b>Digestive system</b>	Less appetite, indigestion, constipation	Constipation
<b>Sex</b>	Altered sex drive or enjoyment, vaginal dryness, difficulty keeping an erection	Altered sex drive or enjoyment, vaginal dryness, difficulty keeping an erection
<b>Vision</b>	Poorer near vision, reduced night vision	Blurred or double vision, blind spots, jerky vision
<b>Cognitive function</b>	Slower to process information, reduced attention, reasoning, and memory	Slower to process information, reduced attention, learning, memory, and reasoning
<b>Mental health</b>	Depression	Low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, mood swings
<b>Bones and joints</b>	Weaker bones, stiffer joints	Weaker bones

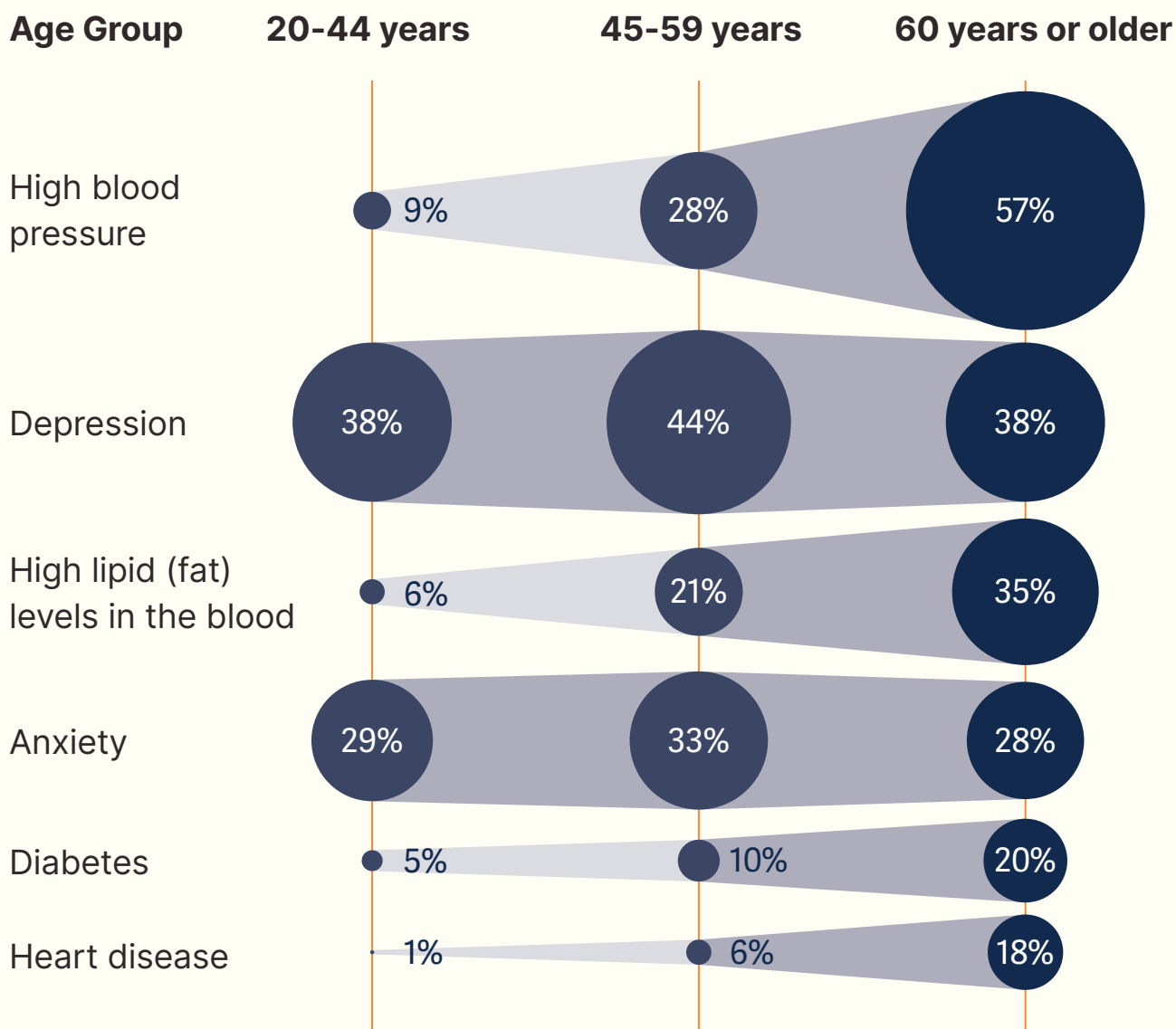
## **Common health conditions in older adults**

As you get older, it becomes increasingly likely that you'll have additional health conditions to your MS. These are sometimes called 'co-morbidities'. People with MS are as likely to get other health conditions as the general population.

About 5–6 in every 10 people over 60 with MS have high blood pressure. More than 2 in every 10 have high levels of lipids (fats such as cholesterol) in the blood, and a similar proportion have a chronic (long-term) lung disease. Some health conditions become more likely as we get older (see graphic).

**People with MS are as likely to get other health conditions as the general population.**

## The percentage of people with MS who have additional health conditions



Graphic reproduced and adapted from 'Why manage comorbidities in people with multiple sclerosis?', with permission from Oxford Health Policy Forum. (<https://www.msbrainhealth.org/healthcare-professionals/why-manage-comorbidities-in-people-with-multiple-sclerosis/>)

Women may also experience problems during and after menopause. These can include bladder problems, changes to sex life, sleep problems and depression. You can learn more about MS and menopause on the MSIF website: [www.msif.org/living-with-ms/ms-and-menopause/](http://www.msif.org/living-with-ms/ms-and-menopause/)

If you have another health condition, some of its symptoms may overlap with those of your MS. Your doctor can help to unpick the cause of any new problems you experience. They can also give you advice on how to manage the two conditions together.

While you're experienced at managing your MS, learning to manage new health needs can feel a challenge. In a study, older people with MS said they were more concerned about their other health conditions than their MS.

Managing your other health conditions well is important. This will help to reduce any impact they might have on your MS, general health, cognitive abilities and quality of life.



## **Can other conditions affect your MS symptoms?**

Some health conditions may worsen or add to your MS symptoms, especially if they are not well controlled.

For example, studies suggest:

- People who have a cardiovascular condition at the time they're diagnosed with MS are likely to need a cane to walk sooner than other people with MS.
- People with MS with higher levels of cholesterol (a type of fat) in their blood have more disability and more brain shrinkage than those with lower cholesterol levels.
- People with MS who are depressed or anxious do not always take their MS medicines (disease-modifying therapies) as prescribed and some stop taking them altogether. This is important because if you don't take your medicines as prescribed, your MS might not be controlled properly.

Some health conditions don't affect MS directly. However, they may add further challenges to your everyday life. medicines given to reduce cholesterol levels). This might mean the statin dose has to be reduced.

Your doctor will be able to explain which treatments are suitable for you, and why.





Image Source: Shutterstock

## **Can other conditions affect your MS treatment options?**

Treatments are available to manage MS (known as disease-modifying therapies) and its symptoms. If you have certain other health conditions, some MS treatments might be less suitable for you. This can be for a variety of reasons, including:

- Certain medical conditions increase the risk that an MS treatment could cause serious side effects. For example, if you have certain cardiovascular problems (such as a recent heart attack or stroke) or are taking beta-blockers or calcium channel blockers for high blood pressure, the MS treatment fingolimod (and some similar medicines) will not be suitable for you.
- Some treatments for MS can affect the way other medications act in your body, and vice versa. This is known as a drug-drug interaction. For example, the MS treatment teriflunomide can affect how quickly your body processes some statins - which are medicines given to reduce cholesterol levels. This might mean the statin dose has to be reduced.

Your doctor will be able to explain which treatments are suitable for you, and why.



**This is a section from the guide 'Living well with MS as you grow older'. Download the full guide here:**

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