

Your cognitive health

MS and growing older can both affect your brain health. This is the way your brain cells grow, change, function and recover. Brain health can affect your cognitive function (thinking, learning and memory), emotions, mental health, behaviour and some body functions.

In this booklet, we look at cognitive health including:

How it can be affected by age and MS

How cognitive difficulties might impact your daily life

Whether you can prevent or slow cognitive decline

Tips for improving your cognitive health



Living well with MS as you grow older

www.msif.org/resource/living-well-with-ms-as-you-grow-older/

How do age and MS affect cognitive function?

Just like a computer, your brain takes in information, stores it, processes it, and makes outputs. This is your cognition.

Many people – both with and without MS – experience some changes in their cognitive abilities as they get older. In one survey, more than half of people with MS aged 45–88 years old said they had cognitive difficulties that interfered somewhat with their daily life.

Some of the ways that age and MS might affect your cognitive function are shown on the next page.

**Your brain takes in information,
stores it, processes it, and
makes outputs.**

Image Source: Shutterstock

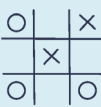


Common effects of age and MS on cognition function

Older Age



Taking longer to process information



Finding it harder to hold thoughts (your working memory)



Finding it harder to make decisions, plan or solve problems



Less able to focus (or divide) your attention

MS



Taking longer to process information



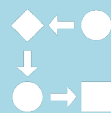
Difficulty concentrating or focussing your attention



Struggling to find a word



Poorer memory



Less able to solve problems, or to understand or form complex ideas (abstract thinking)



Problems visualising or estimating the space between objects

The more common cognitive changes in older people with MS are:

- taking longer to process information
- reduced attention
- learning and memory problems.

Some older people with MS have reduced 'executive function'. Executive function is more complex thinking. We use it to make and adapt plans and control our behaviour or emotions.

Your cognitive problems may be more noticeable when you're tired or fatigued. This is temporary and will improve once you're better rested. **Emotions, anxiety, depression, MS relapses and medicines can also affect cognition.**

How might cognitive difficulties affect your life?

Cognitive difficulties might affect your ability to do some daily tasks, hobbies or aspects of your job. We give some examples in the table.

Cognitive difficulties are often 'hidden symptoms' because they are not immediately obvious to others. Family or friends might find them hard to understand and cope with at times. This might affect your interactions with others and make you feel isolated.

Examples of how cognitive changes can affect your daily life

Taking longer to process information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Needing more time to understand and follow an instruction manual.• Taking longer to decide whether to take up an offer.• Struggling to follow a fast-moving conversation.
Reduced attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finding it harder to split your attention such as packing a bag while talking to a friend).• Not being able to concentrate solely on one thing (such as reading the news in a busy place).
Learning and memory problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Forgetting to set off for a doctor's appointment on time.• Struggling to find the right word.• Not being able to hold a thought (such as a number you just calculated).• Finding it harder to learn a new skill or process (such as setting a new alarm system).
Reduced executive function	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Finding it harder to organise a day trip.• Being less flexible or adaptable (such as replanning if a train is cancelled).• Having less control over your emotions (for example, crying or getting angry more easily).• Not being able to see someone else's point of view.• Finding it harder to control your behaviour (such as being tempted by unhealthy foods).

How quickly might your cognitive abilities decline?

The effects of MS and age on cognition **differ from person to person.**

MS can begin to affect cognitive function quite early in the disease process. However, some studies suggest that cognitive problems caused by MS worsen no quicker than would normally occur with age.

In general, people with MS experience a fairly slow decline in cognitive function as they get older. This speed of decline is similar to that seen in people without MS.

Can you slow cognitive decline?

Having a **well-stimulated brain** might help to slow or lessen the impact of age and MS on your brain. It's unlikely that you can avoid cognitive changes altogether. However, you might be able to reduce their impact on your daily life.

You can improve your cognitive ability with activities that:

- engage your mind
- make you curious
- spark your creativity
- get you thinking
- challenge your problem-solving skills.

Learning to adapt to cognitive changes can reduce their impact on your life. Physical activity has also been shown to improve cognitive health. Getting sufficient sleep and looking after your mental health can help too.

TIPS

how to look after your cognitive health

- **Stimulate your brain to improve your cognitive abilities.** For example, you could read, write, paint, do craft, puzzles or games, or learn a new language or instrument.
- **Join a club or group.** Talking to and doing activities with others gets your brain active. You could join a book club, support group or faith group, for example.
- **Get sufficient rest and sleep.** Fatigue can reduce your cognitive abilities. Take the breaks you need during the day and get plenty of sleep. Chat to your doctor or look online for ways to improve your sleep.
- **Look after your mental health.** Depression and anxiety can both affect cognitive function. To learn about caring for your mental health, see the next section of this guide.
- **Have formal checks on your cognitive abilities.** It can be hard to spot cognitive changes if they occur gradually. Make use of any formal tests your doctor, MS specialist or cognitive specialist offers you to keep track of your cognitive health.
- **Set up routines that aid your memory.** Have a set place for items you use often (such as your glasses or keys). Use a calendar to keep track of appointments and tasks. Put reminders in places you'll see.

Resources

Online information and tools

Cognitive evaluation and interventions (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/ask-an-ms-expert-cognitive-evaluation-and-interventions/>

Cognitive symptoms, assessment and strategy (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/ask-an-ms-expert-ms-cognitive-symptoms-assessment-and-strategy/>

Tips and tricks for sounder sleep (video)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/wellness-break-tips-and-tricks-for-sounder-sleep/>

MS life hacks (Infographic)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/ms-life-hacks-infographic/>

Top tips for brain health (Video)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/top-tips-for-brain-health/>

Cognition and MS (Webinar)

<https://www.msif.org/resource/cognition-ms/>



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

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