



National MS Society Information Sourcebook

www.nationalmssociety.org/sourcebook

Respiration

Respiration or breathing is primarily under the control of the autonomic or “automatic” nervous system. This is the part of the central nervous system that controls vital functions such as heartbeat and respiration without conscious thought. It is rare for MS to affect the autonomic nervous system, and therefore uncommon for breathing problems to occur in MS as a direct result of loss of autonomic control. If breathing problems occur suddenly, it is imperative to see the health care provider immediately or go to the emergency room.

In the minority of MS patients who become very severely disabled, however, breathing problems may occur. In addition to contributing to feelings of fatigue, breathing problems can also interfere with the process of speech and voice production. People with MS who have difficulty breathing due to weakness of chest muscles often benefit from:

- Breathing exercises and devices that encourage deep breathing (incentive spirometers);
- Sitting upright (rather than lying flat);
- Chest percussion, which involves tapping lightly on the chest to loosen secretions.

Breathing problems can also occur as a result of aspiration pneumonia. Aspiration pneumonia results from the inability to clear secretions from the nose and throat, or from swallowing difficulties that result in inhalation of food into the lungs. A swallowing evaluation will generally help patients who repeatedly take food into their lungs. Sometimes, a feeding tube is necessary to avoid continued risk of aspiration pneumonia.

Some medications, such as tranquilizers, muscle relaxants, and opioid analgesics, can depress breathing. The use of these medications should be carefully monitored in anyone with a history of respiratory distress.

See also...

Sourcebook

- Advanced Multiple Sclerosis
- Dysphagia
- Rehabilitation
- Speech and Swallowing Disorders

Society Web Resources

- Rehabilitation in MS
www.nationalmssociety.org/Rehab
- Progressive MS
www.nationalmssociety.org/ProgressiveMS

Books

Holland NJ, Halper J (eds.). *Multiple Sclerosis: A Self-Care Guide to Wellness* (2nd ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2005.
—Ch. 14 Your Lungs and Heart

Kalb R. (ed.) *Multiple Sclerosis: The Questions You Have; The Answers You Need* (3rd ed.). New York: Demos Medical Publishing, 2004.
—Ch. 7 Speech and Voice Disorders
—Ch. 8 Swallowing

The National Multiple Sclerosis Society is proud to be a source of information about multiple sclerosis. Our comments are based on professional advice, published experience, and expert opinion, but do not represent individual therapeutic recommendations or prescription. For specific information and advice, consult your personal physician.

To contact your chapter, call **1-800-FIGHT-MS** (1-800-344-4867) or visit the National MS Society web site: www.nationalmssociety.org.

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