

students with multiple sclerosis

What is multiple sclerosis (MS)?

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic and often disabling disease that affects the central nervous system (CNS), which includes the brain, spinal cord, and optic nerves. MS damages the protective covering around nerve cells called the myelin sheath. When this covering is damaged, nerve signals slow down or stop completely.

The damage is caused by inflammation, which happens when the body's immune system mistakenly attacks the nervous system. The exact cause of this inflammation is unknown, but researchers believe it may be triggered by a virus, a genetic defect, or a combination of both.

How can multiple sclerosis affect a student at school?

Symptoms of MS vary widely because flare-ups can affect different parts of the body and range in severity. Episodes may last for days, weeks, or months and alternate with periods of remission. Symptoms can be unpredictable, and many are not visible to others. The most common school-related challenges for students with multiple sclerosis include:

- **Academic:** difficulty with attention, memory, and decision-making, slower processing speed and poor judgment
- **Social/Emotional:** depression, anxiety
- **Physical:** extreme fatigue (often worse in the afternoon), intense pain or painful muscle spasms, numbness or tingling in any part of the body, vision problems such as double vision, rapid eye movement, or vision loss, dizziness or hearing loss, frequent urination, incontinence, constipation, or stool leakage, loss of balance or coordination, trouble with fine motor skills or walking, tremors or weakness in the arms or legs, slurred speech, difficulty chewing or swallowing, and possible seizures

How can schools support students with multiple sclerosis?

Academic

- Start academic interventions under **Section 504** or **IDEA** (Other Health Impairment).
- Conduct **evaluations** for speech, OT/PT, vision/hearing, assistive technology, as needed.
- Provide **assistive devices** (e.g., wheelchair, walker, wall bars) if needed.
- Offer **homebound** or **intermittent homebound** instruction for extended absences.
- Allow **oral testing** or alternative response formats for lengthy writing tasks.
- Provide **assistive technology** (computer, tablet, word processor) for note-taking and writing.
- Provide **printed copies of notes**, highlighted materials, and recorded lessons.
- Offer **audio versions of reading materials** or enlarge text if vision is affected.
- Be **flexible** with homework and classwork to reduce stress.
- Consider **modified schedules**, half-days, or alternative classes.
- Schedule more **challenging classes** earlier in the day.

Social and Emotional

- Provide **counseling or emotional** support as needed.
- Provide **staff training** and share relevant information about the condition.
- Ensure the student has access to a **trusted adult** for support.
- Maintain **frequent communication** between the student, family, school nurse, and medical team.

Physical

- Offer **rest breaks** during the day to manage fatigue.
- Provide **two sets of textbooks** (one for home, one for school).
- Assign **lockers near classrooms** or on each floor.
- Offer **preferential seating**.
- Allow **elevator access** if stairs pose a safety risk.
- Offer **adaptive PE** or alternatives (e.g., swimming).
- Give **extra time** between classes without penalty.
- Ensure **access to the nurse's office** when needed.
- Monitor for **fatigue, distress, or temperature sensitivity**.
- Offer **unrestricted bathroom access** and **clinic/nurse passes**.
- Keep a **change of clothes** at school in case of accidents.
- Schedule **major tests** and projects on separate days to avoid fatigue.
- Provide **breaks** during standardized testing.

More Resources

- **MedlinePlus - Multiple Sclerosis**
medlineplus.gov/multiplesclerosis.html
- **National Multiple Sclerosis Society**
nationalmssociety.org/
- **Nemours Kids Health**
kidshealth.org

SCHOOL SERVICES

For more information, visit childrens.com/school-services