

Fever Fatale



“A fever could be life threatening.”

That single line from an old episode of “The West Wing” prompted me to immediately Google whether, in fact, a fever is fatal to someone with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis, something with which I was diagnosed in the summer of 2014. Fresh from learning I had MS, this mere suggestion plunged me into a panic. A search of “fever and multiple sclerosis” yielded over 590,000 results.

The first couple of articles I found told me patients who had low-grade fevers suffered more from chronic fatigue than others and that MS patients experience an exacerbation of symptoms when they’re overheated, whether from weather or internally high temps.

But what about this life threatening business? I muttered to myself as I sat at my desk, freaking out over whether what I’d heard on the classic TV show was indeed true. **Could** a fever prove fatal, as the fictional first lady said in the drama about a president who had relapsing remitting MS?

I kept digging. I inputted “fever and multiple sclerosis and West Wing” in the search box. One of the pieces I found explored whether the show’s Jed Bartlet character accurately represented the real-life experiences of MS patients. While noting that the National Multiple Sclerosis Society had bestowed an award to the program for raising awareness about MS, it only briefly mentioned the fever issue, which became a major plot point after President Bartlet, who was suffering an MS flare-up, passed out in the Oval Office. His wife Abbey tearfully admitted it wasn’t the flu that was making him ill.

“I see you trying to cover the panic,” the chief of staff told the first lady, imploring her to reveal what was really going on.

“He has multiple sclerosis, Leo,” Abbey Bartlet said in a near-whisper. “... A fever could be life threatening.”

A newbie to all things MS, I was voraciously devouring every new piece of information about MS. This made me hyper-aware of any pop culture and news media references to the disease because MS was no longer a hypothetical or an abstract.

Not too long after I learned I had MS, I started streaming the first season of “The West Wing” on my laptop and made a realization: Jed Bartlet has MS, too. I vaguely remembered that from when I watched it during its original run many years ago, but the MS storyline hadn’t emotionally registered with me then. Now it did. While I searched for a nugget of truth in that fatal fever line, I came across a mention of a newspaper article quoting the then-president of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society who said, “A fever is no more deadly for people with MS than it is for the general population.”

Phew.

But those petrifying pop culture MS references kept on coming and, as I was still adjusting to my post-diagnosis life, they proved jarring.

There was the father in the movie “Trainwreck” who at one point couldn’t handle his MS symptoms any longer. There was the Showtime drama about the impact of an affair on two marriages, aptly named “The Affair,” whose lead character spent his teen years caring for his mother as her MS symptoms worsened, eventually leading to son-assisted suicide. After the first MS mention in *The Affair*, I took to Google again. As I was typing “Is MS,” the search engine auto-filled “fatal” for me. This wasn’t helpful for a nervous patient.

Another TV drama, “Elementary,” decided to give MS to the girlfriend of a regular character. She promptly broke up with her police captain beau because she didn’t want her MS to become a “burden” to him. Confused, the police captain sought advice from a physician friend who warned of bleak times ahead. “MS is cruel,” the doctor character said. “The progression is gonna be tough on her, and you. It could take years or months, and once the disease really takes hold, she’s gonna need a lot of help.”

Yes, raising awareness of multiple sclerosis is a noble and necessary thing. But frightening MS patients, particularly recently-diagnosed ones, is quite another.

My antennae remain highly sensitive to pop culture MS references (there was even one on “This Is Us” last season that surprised me). But nowadays, I’m not nearly as reactive or as fearful as I used to be. All that research — in addition to regularly peppering my neurologist with questions — has enabled me to more deftly and confidently handle any new pop culture MS references, no matter how dire. Abbey Bartlet doesn’t scare me anymore.

Editor's Note: For more information on heat and temperature in MS, visit [the Society website](#). You can also [learn more about people](#) who have publicly raised awareness and funds for the MS movement.