

Is This MS?



There was one thing to always look forward to on sick days when I was a child, other than staying home from school. It was watching *The Price is Right*. A box of Kleenex, some cough medicine, plain toast and that beloved game show were sick day staples.

I'm not even sure why I enjoyed the show so much as a kid—I had no real sense of money and the numbers that the contestants shouted out just seemed arbitrary. I'd still play along, though.

But now, as an adult, I find myself as an involuntary contestant on a completely different kind of risk-it-all game show called "Is This MS?"

You know the game. It's the one that many people living with MS play any time our bodies decide to do anything even remotely out of the ordinary. We know the scope of MS is broad, and so many things can be a potential symptom.

My finger is itchy. Maybe it's a bug bite. Dry skin? Or eczema. Maybe the skin has touched an irritant. Or... is it MS?

There's a stabbing pain in my chest. Maybe I pulled a muscle. Maybe I'm having a heart attack. Or is it MS?

My muscles ache. Maybe it's the flu. Or I worked too hard at the gym. Perhaps I slept funny. Or maybe it's MS.

Do I have a common cold? Do I need to be worried because my immune defenses are down

due to my medication?

And on and on it goes.

This aspect of MS can be confusing, overwhelming and disheartening.

The frustration is further perpetuated by even more questions.

Is this a symptom of MS, or is this a side effect of my treatment? Or is it indicative of something even more serious? Is this a relapse? Is my disease progressing? Do I need to report this to my doctor? Should I notify my family?

To a non-MSer, this familiar-to-us struggle may seem pretty cut and dry. A relapse is identified by experiencing a new symptom for more than 24 hours, yet many of us may still have a difficult time differentiating between an exacerbation vs. a flare-up vs. a relapse. And I think this comes from not fully understanding the vocabulary used (exacerbation, pseudo-exacerbation, relapse, attack, flare-up, episode, etc.) and also grasping that MS has the potential to leave no stone unturned.

One thing I've learned since being diagnosed with MS is the importance of self-advocacy and remaining vigilant and responsible when it comes to listening to my body. One way I stay on top of my symptoms is by keeping a journal or making notes on a calendar. That way, if something doesn't seem quite right and the time comes for me to check in with my doctor, I can give him an accurate record of how I've been feeling and for how long. I also check in with my husband from time to time and compare notes. He tends to pick up on small changes that I may brush off or not notice at all. It's helpful to hear his feedback and have that extra voice at the doctor's office.

However you choose to stay on top of your symptoms, just be sure to keep your doctor informed. That way, together, you can devise a plan to make sure fewer days are spent calling in sick and playing the dreaded "Is This MS?"