

Why Are Parties Hard for Some People With MS?



Parties, holiday or otherwise, take many different forms, such as:

- **Children's parties** (think 20 six-year-olds, wild with excitement about opening presents and fueled by sugar, sugar, sugar)
- **An office party on a Friday evening** (think 30 adults, happy to be done with the workweek, getting a little loud and maybe tipsy as they discuss interoffice gossip)
- **A family celebration** (think about all of the emotional baggage that comes with this particular mix of people, not to mention your role in preparing the meal and other tasks)

Any of these scenarios can be draining for anyone. However, people with MS may have specific symptoms related to the disease that can make parties like this particularly demanding — emotionally, mentally and physically.

Many people with MS struggle with cognition. Most people associate this with things like not being able to remember something they just heard, or putting something, such as the house keys, down and being unable to find them again five minutes later.

However, cognitive issues can also make it difficult to keep up with a conversation, especially if lots of people are talking at the same time. We may have a hard time finding just the right words to communicate a thought — often, by the time we figure out how to express ourselves, the conversation has moved on to a new topic.

Fatigue can also be a big impediment to being the life of the party. Many of us barely have

the energy reserves to make it through a normal day. Holiday time, with the extra stuff that we have to do, can really wipe us out. A holiday party can require more energy than we have.

Speech problems are another type of MS symptom. Dysarthria is a speech disorder in which the pronunciation is unclear, but the meaning of what is said is normal. It can cause people to speak in slow or strange rhythms. It can also make people with MS speak more softly than they would like or slur their words. This makes it hard to participate in conversations at parties, especially if there is loud music or lots of background noise.

These are just some of the challenges that people with MS bring with them to parties. Let's not forget other MS symptoms that can impact many of us, such as urinary incontinence, mobility and balance issues, various pain symptoms — all of which can make it difficult to relax and enjoy a party.

However, this doesn't mean that we should sit at home while others are having fun. I have a few suggestions for how to enjoy yourself at a party, particularly during this holiday season:

- **Be picky.** If you don't really, really want to go to a party, don't go.
- **Plan ahead.** Rest up before the party, so that you build some energy reserves to carry you through.
- **Strategize your socializing.** Have a two-sentence answer prepared for the "how are you?" question, so that you don't find yourself stumbling around looking for an appropriate response.
- **Have one-on-one conversations.** Trying to participate in a large group discussion can be hard, especially if the topics are moving quickly. Find an interesting person and have a nice chat, preferably in a quiet place.
- **Don't be afraid to leave early.** Listen to your body, and do what it says in terms of getting out of there and into bed.
- **Limit the booze.** Alcohol can make fatigue and other issues worse. A drink or two is fine, but don't try to keep up with "Party Marty" from the office next to yours.

My goal here is not to be a Scrooge, but to remind all of you that we can still enjoy the holidays. Doing some things on our terms can reduce stress and fatigue and keep the season merry.

Happy Holidays, my friends!