

Lurching with enthusiasm



Mark Somerfield shares a humorous take on MS symptoms.

by Mark Somerfield

Frankly, I don't see the point of having multiple sclerosis if I can't have any fun with it. So that's what I do. Not in any make-lemonade-out-of-lemons way, or any of that malarkey. I just do it. It's how I'm wired, I guess.

So, how does this play out? Well, when people are getting on my nerves, I let them know—playfully—that I have a crutch and I'm not afraid to use it. Or when I'm chatting on the phone, if I tell the person on the other end that I've got to run, I'll add that I don't quite run—it's more like I lurch with enthusiasm.

But on to my more sardonic, darker MS adventures, which I'm delighted to report, involve excretion. You've been warned. Let's talk urination first. MS can cause muscle spasticity, and a spastic bladder makes for some very slow urination. MS made me an old guy before my time, and I'm scared to think how long it will take me to take a leak when my prostate bulks up.

Taking my time

I've adapted to my spastic bladder by sitting down to pee. It's simply easier than standing in one place for a very long time, especially if your MS legs are also spastic. Besides, I get more complete bladder emptying if I sit down. Post-void dribbling—continuing to pee after you thought you were done—may sound fun, like maybe you're going to go outside and shoot hoops after urinating, but it's mostly messy.

So, there I was sitting on the toilet in a restroom stall, doing my really slow emptying thing the other day, when two friends—young guys, I'm pretty certain—came into the restroom to take a leak. I couldn't help but overhear them and mentally noted, with not a little admiration, that they urinated with tremendous force, sort of like unchained fire hoses. As I dribbled urine, almost inaudibly, I started to feel nostalgic for my pre-MS stream. I also realized that I was experiencing my first case of acute Urine Stream Envy. Yeah, I know: me and several million older guys with big prostates.

MS can also seriously slow bowel function, and chronic constipation is pretty common in the ranks. In my case, the stuff lies dormant, sometimes for days and days, in the lower reaches of my colon. After a while, it reaches a critical mass, at which point it can descend with precious little warning, like Lord Byron's legendary wolf on the fold. I've had my share of accidents, maybe five or six in the past 10 years, and I have learned to respect the urge—any urge of any intensity.

The gift that keeps on giving, MS also has contributed to some pretty achy testicles. I e-mailed my neurologist, who is at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, and asked him if he could recommend a specialist in urologic complications of MS. As soon as I sent the e-mail, I thought, wait, this is Johns Hopkins. Of course they have a specialist in urologic complications of MS. There's probably a urologist there who specializes in the left testicle of men with MS.

My neurologist provided me with the names of two urologists. I picked one and made an appointment. He was very helpful. He gave me a prescription for some pills and suggested that the pain might lessen over time, which I was kind of hoping for, as the pills did little to ease my aches.

Boxers or briefs?

In the meantime, I purchased some boxer shorts. The briefs I'd worn for my first 48 years had become too uncomfortable; maybe the relative freedom of boxers would help a bit?

The boxers did help but they led to a new concern. Although I hadn't had an accident for a while, I'd had some close calls. It occurred to me that briefs, although less comfortable, were almost certainly better for keeping anything from traveling too far astray. Boxers, on the other hand, afforded relatively easy egress to the world at large, a socially horrifying prospect. The take-home lesson? Boxers for comfort, briefs for containment.

So, my fun with MS plays out a couple of ways. There are my quippy comments—short and sweet, or maybe a little sweet and sour. And then there are my more acrid adventures with MS, like the challenges of having achy-breaky testicles. These approaches aren't for everyone, to be sure, but I've found they help me keep some perspective and facing forward—with a wry smile and a lurch.

Mark Somerfield was diagnosed with MS in 1991 and lives in Forest Hill, Md.

We want to hear your unique viewpoint on MS. Submit your story to editor@nmss.org.