



## **MS Learn Online Feature Presentation**

### **Numbness Featuring: Dr. Stephen Krieger**

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**Rebecca:** I do experience numbness. I feel as if part of my feet are made of novocaine or filled with novocaine

**Holly:** Sometimes the numbness feels like a squeezing, sometimes it feels like a friend who describes it as the bumble bees. Sometimes the numbness feels like when it falls asleep, it just doesn't wake up. So, it varies depending on the severity level of fatigue

**Casey:** It's more of an annoying factor and I really have to focus.

**Susan:** When I do aerobic exercise, if I'm doing it for a while, that's how I know to stop, because I start feeling [numb].

**Cheryl:** And one day I was making some baked potatoes and I thought, hmm, I can't find a potholder, so I just reached in and took it out with my bare hands, and I couldn't feel it.

**>>Kate Milliken:** Numbness of the face, body or extremities is one of the most common symptoms of MS. Often it is the first symptom experienced by those eventually diagnosed with MS.

Hello. My name is Kate Milliken, and welcome to MS Learn Online. To discuss numbness, we have Dr. Stephen Krieger. Dr. Krieger is a neurologist at the Corinne

Goldsmith Dickinson Center for MS, and an assistant professor at the Mount Sinai Medical Center, both in New York City. Welcome to MS Learn Online, Dr. Krieger.

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** Thank you for having me.

>>**Kate Milliken:** So, why don't we start with you actually giving us a little description of what numbness is.

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** Well, numbness is a word that comes to mean a lot of things. It in general describes a loss of sensation. When patients describe numbness, they could mean that they can't feel things that they usually feel. Often, they also mean that they are feeling unusual things. This is commonly described as pins and needles. A term that we use for that is paresthesias. Sometimes that can be uncomfortable or annoying. Other times it can actually be, frankly, painful or normal sensations that should feel not unpleasant, like water, can somehow feel very unpleasant, like sand or hot rocks.

Numbness is a common symptom in MS because MS is a demyelinating disease that affects the conduction of signal from the brain to the body, and from the body to the brain. When the signals coming from the body to the brain are affected, the brain is no longer getting normal sensory information, and in the absence of that information, numbness is the common description for it. Now, that can feel -- that can exist in either the legs or arms, it can exist across the body. And I also think of symptoms like the "MS hug," this tight, squeezing feeling that many patients with MS can feel either around their mid-section or around their limbs as a form of numbness, a type of loss of normal sensation.

>>**Kate Milliken:** How many of your patients would you say generally experience numbness, and why do you think it's so common?

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** Well, it is probably present in perhaps half of my patients at some point in time or another. It can sometimes occur in the setting of an MS relapse or an MS attack. In that setting, numbness can come on relatively acutely over a day or a few days and persist for a week or a few weeks and then fade. Numbness can also be a persistent symptom in MS, so sometimes patients will have that for the long term and not just as part of an acute relapse.

And it's extremely common, because most of what our brain and our spinal cord are designed to do is to feel things and perceive things from the world. So, any MS lesion

along the way in the spinal cord, which is a vulnerable area in MS, can interrupt some of those fibers and some of those signals that are coming through from the body to the brain and cause numbness.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Numbness, as you said, can have so many different levels in terms of light to heavy. Can you explain what kind of impact numbness can have on a patient?

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** Well, numbness is something that we take seriously, but it doesn't worry us quite as much as other symptoms in MS. I would say that in general, motor weakness or clumsiness or imbalance, or loss of vision, are things that we are more worried about in a sense than numbness. But if numbness is extremely mild and is just an intermittent sense of tingling or pins and needles, that's of less concern. It doesn't usually take away any abilities from anyone. It can be distracting, but it's not otherwise disabling. However, when numbness is severe, when there is a profound loss of sensation, that can cause difficulties with function and even disability.

An example of that might be if somebody is right-handed and they have a significant amount of numbness in their dominant hand, that could impair their ability to write or to type, or to do other things if they can't feel their fingers as well as they usually do. And in that way, numbness can be a concerning symptom, and if it's part of a relapse that has caused numbness like that, that is something that we would consider treating with a course of steroids for that relapse.

**Cheryl:** When I'm running or walking, my foot gets numb and luckily I have the ankle/foot orthotics, so I know I won't trip or fall.

**Cheryl:** What I found helps me when I'm feeling tingling and numbness is actually to do some weight-lifting exercises or strength training exercises. Even if it's just something simple like doing pushups against the wall, it seems to help.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Are there any strategies that you would recommend to patients to deal with their numbness?

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** Well, numbness, the loss of sensation, is not something that we have medicines that can particularly treat unless it has happened in the setting of a relapse and we treat it with steroids. Numbness, when it takes on an uncomfortable or painful tingling type of feeling is something that we can treat with a

bunch of medicines that can help to take the edge off some of that pain or discomfort. It's not unlike what's called neuropathy or neuropathic pain.

In general, besides medicines or pharmacology ways of approaching it, patients can try and not do things that bring out numbness, to try and avoid things that worsen their numbness or their tingling. Sometimes that means being mindful about not getting overheated, for instance. So, a patient who exercises a lot and likes to work out to the fullest may want to back off on it a little bit, work out to 90% instead of 100%, so that their body doesn't get overheated, which can often exaggerate or bring out some of those numbness symptoms.

>>**Kate Milliken:** Dr. Krieger, thank you so much for your obvious knowledge on this subject.

>>**Dr. Stephen Krieger:** My pleasure.

>>**Kate Milliken:** This is Kate Milliken for MS Learn Online. Thank you for joining us.