

HOW TO DEAL WITH MUSCLE PAIN AND TREMORS

Many ALS patients suffer from muscle pain and tremors. However, there is a lot of confusion about what they exactly are and how they can be treated.

In fact muscle pain and tremors only have 1 thing in common: they have something to do with muscles. Other than that, they are very different. A tremor is a strong, rhythmic movement that is often noticeable in patients with Parkinson's disease for example. It is an involuntary muscle contraction and relaxation or twitching movement that hinders daily functioning. Tremors can be caused by neurological diseases affecting parts of the brain, but also by the intake of drugs or by lack of sleep, too much stress or vitamin deficiencies.

Some ALS patients use the term 'tremor' also when in fact they are talking about muscle failure. When people push their muscles to their limits, they can no longer function appropriately and they stop working and/or start trembling. You can often see it in power lifters during the Olympics. However, ALS patients often reach their limit very fast. Lifting their wrist of the table can already be enough of a struggle against gravity, and the muscle contraction following that effort can look like a tremor because the movement cannot be completed as planned.

The cause of muscle pain in ALS seems to be a little more complex. There are many different kinds of muscle pains. Some people experience discomfort in their muscles going from cramps to spasms. Everybody has cramps every once in a while, for example after sitting or lying in an uncomfortable position for a while, or at night, and especially ALS patients experience this very often. Muscle pain can also come up when people use all their force to make a movement. In ALS patients this can happen even in simple daily activities, like brushing their hair. Others sometimes experience joint pain, for example in their shoulders.

Treatments

Muscle pain treatments generally focus on decreasing the muscle tension or muscle tone (a continuous and passive partial muscle contraction) and spasticity. Often times oral medication is recommended, for example

baclofen and tizanadine (Zanaflex). Usually treatment starts with a low dose that is gradually increased. The gradual increase is necessary because the diminishing muscle tone causes standing up and walking to be more difficult. Baclofen generally has very few side effects, whereas tizanadine can cause dizziness and a dry mouth. The latter can be an advantage because it helps to fight excess saliva production. However, some people do not react well to these drugs. They can try other types of medication, such as cyclobenzaprine (Flexeril) and metaxalone (Skelaxen). Even if a drug works for a while, the effect can wane over time. It is very important to have your treatment or therapy reviewed on a regular basis as to make sure it is still the best solution for you and your situation.

Another very simple method that works against muscle cramps and spasms is sufficient hydration. Sometimes ALS patients don't manage to take in enough liquids, or they avoid drinking because of their impaired mobility. It is also important to keep the level of electrolytes in the body on a healthy level.

Often it is useful to talk to a physiotherapist who can give some more information about how to avoid muscle cramps. If for example your calf muscle starts cramping up, you can lift your foot and pull your toes towards you which pulls the calf muscle in the opposite direction - the cause of the cramp is then taken away. The same principle of creating an opposite force works for most muscles that cramp up. Occupational therapy can also be useful because it allows you to experiment with adapted aids or other strategies to prevent or diminish the discomfort of muscle problems.

Muscle problems are very complex and they can have a significant impact on the daily life of ALS patients, therefore it is highly recommended to make an appointment in a clinic that is ALSA certified. In such clinics you are welcomed by a multidisciplinary team, offering medication, breathing therapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and medical care. They all work together in order to find the best way to treat your problems.

Translation: **Magali**