

by Susan E. Bennett, PT, DPT, EdD

## What to expect from your first PT visit

Physical therapists, according to Shirley Sahrman, PT, PhD, FAPTA, are “movement experts.” PTs are trained to assess how a person moves, to determine what symptoms may challenge functional mobility, and to work together with the person to find solutions.

In MS, mobility challenges most often occur as a result of weakness, spasticity and balance problems.

Weakness is often accompanied by spasticity—that stiffness and heaviness felt in the legs. Weakness typically occurs in the muscles that bend and lift the leg while spasticity occurs in muscles that extend the leg and help us to stand. These two symptoms are major factors that get in the way of safe ambulation and even the ease with which a person is able to get in and out of bed.

Balance is more complex. Weakness and spasticity in the trunk and legs can prevent a person from holding the body upright while sitting or standing. In that case, the PT will focus on managing the spasticity and improving “core,” or trunk, stability. Standing, walking, or other changes in position

Mobility is key to maintaining quality of life. When MS challenges your ability to move, a physical therapist can help you build the flexibility, strength and spirit to keep moving.

may create a sensation of being off-balance. This is because the information processed from the inner ear (vestibular) and visual systems may be slowed down or distorted. Other symptoms that impair balance include double or blurred vision and dizziness.

### The physical therapy evaluation

A first appointment with a PT includes a comprehensive evaluation of mobility together with an analysis of the underlying problem. New patients are asked to demonstrate:

- Getting in and out of bed or up from a low table
- Lying down on bed/low table, rolling side to side and returning to sitting

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE MARILYN HILTON MS ACHIEVEMENT CENTER AT UCLA

Melinda Guttry, PT, performs a physical therapy evaluation for Michelle Hazan. Here she is testing the range of motion in the hip, knee and ankle.



Manual muscle testing of the shoulder flexor muscles.



# Mobility **ALERT**

- Sitting still and moving while seated
- Moving from a sitting to a standing position with and without hand support in standing
- Standing still and moving while standing
- Walking on even and uneven surfaces
- Climbing stairs, ascending and descending curbs
- Getting in and out of a car

The therapist may ask the person to walk with a cane or a walker, or to walk without an assistive device if the person currently uses one. Walking with a device helps the PT examine posture and

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A single limb balance test.

changes in balance and stability. Walking without a device helps the PT to assess any specific gait deviations that the device may hide.

After movement analysis, testing is done to determine what symptoms may be at play. Manual muscle testing (MMT) will determine arm, leg and trunk strength. This is usually followed by passive movement, where limbs are moved to check for resistance to the motion, which signals spasticity. During this test a PT determines the weight of the limb—a leg with spasticity feels much heavier than a leg that moves freely.

For balance assessment, posture and trunk strength are checked first, followed by reviewing the person’s ability to move safely while sitting and standing. The PT will ask the person to follow a moving target with their eyes and then to keep their eyes fixed while moving their head side to side and up and down. Finally, the PT will check sensation in feet and legs, as well as the pulse in the foot to assess circulation.

## **The rehab program**

Once a PT has determined the underlying problems, a rehabilitative program is developed, including exercise and specific mobility tasks, to enhance recovery of function. And, yes, a PT might work with someone to develop easier means of movement that may differ from how the person is used to getting around. An assistive device might be recommended and, if agreed on, prescribed.

## **Partnership for life**

In our clinic our motto is: “This is a lifelong relationship. We expect you to be an active participant in your rehabilitation and wellness and we will be with you on life’s journey.”

Call an MS Navigator™ at 1-800-344-4867 and ask for referrals to physical therapists in your area.

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