

Script – Print – Spreading the word about MS

Actress Christina Applegate opens up about her diagnosis

Actress Christina Applegate is sharing with the world her struggle with multiple sclerosis (MS).

But she wishes she had paid more attention to early symptoms such as balance issues a few years ago.

MS is a disease that impacts the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves, which make up the central nervous system and controls everything we do, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society (NMSS).

The exact cause is unknown, but genetics can be a factor. Symptoms are unpredictable but include numbness, tingling, mood changes, memory problems, pain, fatigue, and loss of vision. According to medical experts, MS presents differently with each patient and symptoms may be temporary or long-lasting. There is no cure for MS, but symptoms are treatable with medication and stress management.

“Usually, when it first presents MS is characterized by a relapse,” says Dr. Tiffani Franada, a neurologist with OSF HealthCare. “So it may be new symptoms that last for days at a time, and it can affect vision so patients could have a loss of vision. It could cause numbness on one side or both sides of the body, weakness on one side or both sides of the body and include really terrible balance episodes. These events usually lasts longer than a day. If patients are having those symptoms they need to seek care and talk to their primary care doctor and get referred potentially to a neurologist.”

MS can impact mobility, balance, energy level and cognition (how we learn and understand). Symptoms can worsen due to stressors such as lack of sleep, emotional stress or an infection. But experts agree that it can be difficult to diagnose MS since these symptoms are also consistent with other issues such as seasonal affective disorder, PMS and thyroid dysfunction.

According to the NMSS, there are more than one million people living with MS in the United States. Most people are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50, but MS can develop in young children and older adults.

A diagnosis, says Dr. Franada, can be overwhelming, especially among younger patients.

“A lot of patients who are diagnosed are diagnosed young within their working years and that can be very difficult, and a lot of patients are women,” she says. “People are affected with MS at a rate of three to one female to male – many of these women are in their careers and might be considering starting families. There’s a lot to put into that, considering how that will affect their day-to-day life.”

A treatment plan includes a comprehensive approach created by a care team that includes a neurologist, therapists, nurses trained in MS and a social worker. Since there is no cure, doctors can prescribe drugs that may slow the course of the disease, prevent or treat attacks, help manage

stress and ease symptoms. Physical therapy may help patients with strength and balance issues, and help manage pain and fatigue. Regular exercise can help boost energy levels and improve stress and anxiety.

Dr. Franada stresses that all is not lost when it comes to an MS diagnosis. Medical advancements have come a long way and that's why she treats her patients with hope and positivity.

“I think that we should all be very hopeful,” she says. “The world of MS has changed precipitously in the past 30 years. The first treatment for this disease came in 1993 and since then, we have 20 different treatment options for this disease so we've really come a long way. If we diagnose patients early, we really can treat their symptoms and help to get them on a productive path to hopefully ever prevent any further disease activity.”

When celebrities like Christina Applegate come forward, Dr. Franada says it gives hope to other people going through a similar experience. Recently, Applegate made her first appearance since announcing her diagnosis, when she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame with the help from a walking cane.

“I think it's empowering and we definitely want to get the word out,” says Dr. Franada. “We want patients to seek care, we want them to be in our clinic, we want to be able to help them to diagnose the condition, but also to understand that it is okay to use an assist device for walking. We much rather them be safe than sorry.”

For more information on MS and clinic options, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).