

MG in the Workplace

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) protects qualified individuals from discrimination in employment, public services, transportation, public accommodation and telecommunication. This Act provides equal opportunity to qualified individuals. Under the Act, a qualified individual is defined as one who must have a record of, or be regarded as, having a substantial impairment. A substantial impairment is one that significantly limits or restricts a major life activity such as hearing, seeing, speaking, breathing, performing manual tasks, caring for oneself, learning or walking. If MG has caused a substantial impairment that limits or restricts a major life activity, this law applies to you.

According to the ADA, employers with 15 or more employees may not discriminate against qualified individuals with disabilities. These employers must reasonably accommodate the disabilities of qualified applicants or employees unless undue hardship would result.

The part of ADA that prohibits job discrimination is enforced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and State and local civil rights enforcement agencies that work with the commission.

MG in the Workplace

This pamphlet is written for use by the employee with myasthenia gravis (MG) to facilitate communication of his/her occasional job limitations and/or treatment needs to the employer. The information provided should help the employer gain a broader understanding of MG and its symptoms as well as provide possible ways for both the employer and employee to respond to symptoms in the workplace. This in turn should lead to optimum work performance by the employee.

MG symptoms vary from person to person. Some individuals may be severely affected by MG while others may have very mild symptoms. Symptoms can fluctuate from day to day and sometimes even hour to hour. A review of the symptoms that may occur and possible ways to deal with these in the workplace follows.

Ptosis: Drooping eyelids, or ptosis, along with a mask-like drawn facial appearance is one of the more apparent symptoms of MG. If this should occur, the employer should be made aware that this change in facial features does not indicate boredom or a lack of appropriate rest. It is instead due to a weakness in the eyelids and facial muscles.

Diplopia: Double vision, or diplopia, may occur in addition to or independent of ptosis. Occasionally correction of this problem may require that a patch be worn over one eye for a period of time. During this time tasks that involve a large amount of eye strain or visual acuity may need to be postponed or reassigned.

Slurred speech: If slurred speech occurs, it may be necessary to reschedule extensive verbal communications or oral presentations. A written presentation may be a possible alternative in this situation. An audio taping of a required presentation is another alternative. This would allow the presenter to rest as speech became difficult and begin taping again once speech became clear.

Swallowing difficulties: At these times it may be necessary to request a slightly longer lunch break, perhaps combining the lunch time given with the AM and/or PM break that may be provided. Another choice may be dividing the lunch time in half to be added to each of the AM and PM breaks with small meals taken at these times.

Muscle weakness and fatigue: Jobs requiring repeated physical exertion such as heavy lifting or stair climbing, etc. may require more frequent or longer breaks than those taken by other employees. Again, an option may be to divide the lunch break accordingly. This allows the MG patient to recover strength and stamina enough to complete the assigned tasks. The work load itself may need to be adjusted so that most of the strenuous activities take place at those times when strength is at its optimum.

There may be times when symptoms will worsen. An especially busy or stressful situation on the job may call for an occasional absent day to allow for needed rest and the recovery of muscle strength. The possibility of flex time may be utilized to meet the needs of the employer and employee. If the employer does not offer a formal flex time policy, there are still several ways to encourage him/her to allow such an arrangement for the employee with MG.

- Show how the company will benefit. Explain how the employers' productivity level could best be maintained due to strength conservation in the time frame during which the work would occur.
- Anticipate the employer's concerns. Be ready for questions. Who will answer inquiries about projects when the employee is not there? How can the employee be reached if an emergency occurs?
- Be flexible. If there are occasions when meetings or extra jobs must occur at times other than the agreed upon flex time hours, reassurance that the employee can make arrangements to be available for these special occurrences may help. If the employer remains skeptical, proposal of a month long trial schedule may help to convince him/her of the benefits of such an arrangement.

Unlike some others, a person with MG whose symptoms are on the increase cannot push themselves that extra mile. They may want to but their body sets limits on them. Therefore, committee work or social activities that are not directly job related but are suggested involvement by the company may need to be discussed with the employer.

Effective communication is essential to maintain a good employer/employee relationship and to promote optimum work performance on the part of the person with MG. This allows the employee to more readily accept the constraints that myasthenia gravis may place on his/her working career. Good communication also allows the employer to ask those questions that are necessary to adjust work loads and schedules accordingly. Most importantly, it allows for a better overall understanding of what MG is all about.