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Communication and Eating & Drinking: aids and equipment for assisting with daily functioning of people with MSA

This fact sheet is part of a series of fact sheets focussing on different equipment and aids that may be of benefit to those affected by MSA. This sheet looks at communication equipment and aids to help eating and drinking.

There is a vast range of equipment available so this list is not exhaustive and it is not meant as recommendations - this sheet has been developed to give you an idea of what sort of aids are available and we do not endorse any specific piece of equipment.

Health Professionals

Speech and Language Therapist (SLT)

SLTs (sometimes referred to as SALTs) are health professionals that specialise in treating people with speech, language and communication problems. They also work with people who have eating and swallowing problems. And through a process of observation and assessment they can determine difficulties and potential solutions or coping mechanisms.

It is vital that you discuss with a speech and language therapist any items you think might be of benefit to you. You can get a referral to an SLT through your GP or other professional member of your multidisciplinary team. Also many Speech and Language Therapy services, via the NHS, now operate an open referral process where you can make your own referral.

Occupational Therapist

An occupational therapist (OT) is another member of your multi-disciplinary team that can help determine equipment that may benefit you. An OT is trained to assess and treat physical conditions to prevent disability and promote independence.

They can carry out an assessment of an individual's needs and determine the best possible coping strategies and recommend appropriate equipment for daily living. They can also visit you in your home to determine environmental adaptations that may be of benefit.

You can access an OT through the NHS. This means speaking to one of your medical team or to your GP for a referral. You can also gain access to an OT through your local council's social care services.

Communication equipment

The following are types of Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) that a health professional may recommend. AAC is the term used to describe the different methods that can be used as an alternative to speech or as a supplement to it. AAC varies in terms of simplicity, technology and cost. There are advantages and disadvantages of each type and it is very much what works best for you, which is why it is essential you consult a professional before committing time and money to a potential solution.

Communication boards

These basic, but very effective, aids are simply a list of words, letters or pictures on a grid. For letters the entire alphabet can be displayed; for words and pictures the most relevant and frequently-used words can be added. They are used by simply pointing to the

A	b	c	d	1	2
E	f	g	h	3	4
I	j	k	l	m	n
O	p	q	r	s	t
U	v	w	x	y	z
5	6	7	8	9	0

appropriate word, letter or picture to convey meaning. Although simple they are cheap and very effective, involve no technology and fit in a pocket or handbag.

Lightwriter

A lightwriter is an electronic device much like a typewriter except that it will speak the words typed into it. It also has a display screen that shows what has been typed. They are portable and very versatile as you can type anything into them. Modern versions have memories that will store often used expressions or sentences such as "Can I have a cup of tea please", reducing the time it takes to communicate. They have an option of voices for both male and female. The downside of lightwriters is the cost, which can be in excess of £3,000.



Assistive technology

The iPad, by Apple, leads the way in hand held tablet computers. It is a small and lightweight touch screen portable device that comes with a variety of accessibility options. The basic version iPad 2 costs around £400 and their effectiveness is greatly enhanced by the addition of apps. software applications. One such app is Proloquo2go which costs around £110. This app is a speech software package that will turn the iPad into something similar to a lightwriter but at a fraction of the cost. It uses a combination of words and pictures to build up sentences that are then spoken by the iPad. Commonly used words or phrases can be saved for quick use. The main disadvantage is that the iPad uses touch screen technology and is quite sensitive, making it easy to miss the desired key or hit it several times in rapid



succession. Extra technology can be bought that can guide fingers to the right keys. Not everyone can get on with an iPad but if you can, or you currently use one, software like the Proloquo2go, Easy Speak or Predictable can make the iPad a very powerful communication tool.

Voice Amplifier

A voice amplifier is a piece of technology that amplifies your own voice. It is supplied with a clip-on microphone to attach to your clothing and a head/neck microphone to place over your head or wear around your neck. It feeds the sounds you make into an amplifier for increased volume. They are simple to use and rely on batteries for power. It is important to note that the amplifier will help people with a quiet voice as it will make it louder but they will not correct a speech pronunciation problem.

The disadvantage of voice amplifiers is that some people find the head/neckband uncomfortable to use.

Intercom / Call alarms

Wireless doorbell or baby alarms are available from hardware stores such as B&Q. While not a communication aid, they are useful for alerting someone in a different room meaning you don't have to shout to gain someone's attention.

Assistive Technology

Each CCG (Clinical Commissioning Group) will have a person who can advise on a range of assistive technologies. They can be accessed through your occupational therapist.

Eating and Drinking

The following are types of equipment that a professional might recommend for helping with eating and drinking. Again, the list is not exhaustive and is meant as a guide to help you understand the types of equipment available. An occupational therapist should be consulted and they will observe you and make recommendations specific to your own needs.

Foam handled cutlery

These are, as they sound, cutlery that has large foam handles. This is to help improve the grip on the cutlery.



Forks with cutting edges



These forks, such as Dyna Forks, are designed with cutting edges along one side so that people with only one working hand are able to cut and eat food. They come in both left and right handed versions.

Also available is a fork, knife and spoon combined called a ~~splayed~~ as well as other types of one-handed cutlery. Angled cutlery may also be helpful.

Non-slip placemats

It is often the simple ideas that are overlooked and a rubber, or like material, placemat will keep items from moving around while using them. Non-slip placemats can be used to hold cups, plates, computers/ iPads and books

Plate guards and plate warmers

A plate guard is a collar like device that slips around the plate that prevents food sliding off when coordination is difficult. And plate warmers can be used to keep food warm if eating becomes slower.



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Ordered meals

Companies, such as Wiltshire Farm Foods, provide ready made nutritionally balanced meals delivered to your home. They also have a range of soft and pureed foods for those with swallowing difficulties. A brochure of the meals available can be downloaded from:

<http://care.wiltshirefarmfoods.com/>

Hands free drinking vessels

Hands free drinking vessels enable people, usually dependent upon others to help them, access their own drink. Many different types of vessel exist and again it would be a case of the best option that suits the individual.



The Drink-up range from www.drinkup.com are simple and versatile and offer solutions for different situations. Including options for attaching to wheelchairs.



Neater Solutions Ltd www.neater.co.uk provide an extensive range of specialist equipment to aid eating and drinking. The Neater Drinker is a sturdy ceramic mug with lid and a non-return valve straw. They also provide a similar product with a thermos mug to keep liquids warm (pictured below in the non-return valve straw). Or a thermally insulated metallic version.



The Neater Powered Drinker enables people to drink liquids and pureed foods at their own pace.



Other drinking options exist including the Hydrant 2, which can also be attached to wheelchairs and other stable frames. The platypus range of drinking bottles are commonly used by campers and outdoor activities but they durable, practical and offer a range of different styles.

It is very important for people with MSA to drink plenty of liquid as it helps control blood pressure, bladder problems and bowel problems.

Non-return valve straws

This is a narrow bore straw with a one way valve so if you stop to take a breath before you are able to suck fluid all the way up the straw; it stays in position in the straw. The Pat Saunders straw is an example of a non-return valve straw but other makes are available.



Equipment Demonstrations

There are many Disabled Living Centres around the country where large items of equipment can be viewed and tried. You need to ring the centre and explain what equipment you wish to see and make an appointment for a member of staff to provide a demonstration.

An extensive (though not exhaustive) list of centres can be found on The Assist UK website, which has a postcode search facility to find your nearest centre: www.assist-uk.org

Further information

The Disabled Living Foundation . www.dlf.org.uk - DLF is a national charity that provides impartial advice, information and training on daily living aids.

The Assist UK . a resource for people searching for disability advice and equipment . www.assist-uk.org

The Disabled Living Equipment Centre . www.disabledliving.co.uk . DLEC provide a range of services to improve the quality of life of disabled people, their families and carers.

Commercial sites selling products:

Better Life Healthcare - www.betterlifehealthcare.com

Disability Supplies - www.disabilitysupplies.com

Focus on Disability - www.focusondisability.org.uk

Kapitex Healthcare - www.kapitex.com

Handy Healthcare - www.handyhealthcare.co.uk

Neater Solutions Ltd - www.neater.co.uk

Nottingham Rehab Supplies - www.nrs-uk.co.uk

Proloquo2Go - www.proloquo2go.com/

Steddy Disability Aids - www.disabilityaids.net

Toby Churchill - <http://www.toby-churchill.com/>

Second hand equipment:

Accessible Trader - www.accessibletrader.co.uk

Apparelyzed - www.apparelyzed.com/disability-equipment/

Disability Equipment Register - www.disabilityequipment.org.uk

Disabled Living Foundation - www.dlf.org.uk

The MSA Trust does not endorse or recommend any specific product mentioned in this fact sheet. We do not receive any money from any organisation mentioned.

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REVISION DATE: 04/16 | REVIEW DATE: 04/18 | VERSION: 1.2

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