

Preparing for a colonoscopy

by Shelley Peterman Schwarz

When I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1979, there was no way to predict that I'd have the primary-progressive form and that I would become severely disabled within a few years. Needless to say, it has changed my life dramatically. It's taken years to learn how to be my own advocate and how to "best take care of me." Here's one example:

In 1994, my bowel habits changed and the gastroenterologist wanted me to have a colonoscopy. I was terrified. I'd have to be on clear liquids the day before the test. The day of the test, I'd have to drink a gallon of a special liquid to clean out my system.* This "cleansing" could take 4–6 hours. I was nervous because I'm unable to use my legs and have only minimal use of my left hand. Also, normally, I don't have much warning before I need to get on the commode so I knew

A colonoscopy—an examination of the large intestine—is recommended for all adults over 50 as the most effective defense against colon cancer. "All" includes people with MS. For more information, see "Spotlight on Personal Care: Bladder and bowel problems" at nationalmssociety.org/BladderBowel.



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"Discovery," oil on linen, 3.5' x 3.5'

that meant I'd have to sit on the toilet for the entire 4–6 hours.

As my anxiety level rose, it caused my MS to rear its ugly head; I could barely move or think clearly. Three days before the test, I called to cancel it. The doctor's nurse asked why.

I told her about my MS and what a day of clear liquids and 4–6 hours on the toilet preparing for a 1 p.m. test would do to me. (I'd be in bed for days/weeks recovering.) Since the doctor had never examined me before, neither he nor his staff could know how disabled I was. I was frightened because I was putting myself in the hands of people I didn't know and who didn't know me.

I couldn't believe the nurse was so kind. She wanted to know what she could do to calm my fears. So I asked her:

- Could I have the test earlier in the day? I weaken as the day goes on.
- Could I do the day of prep in the hospital? I was afraid I'd be too weak to get there.

● Could I speak with the nurse who would be assigned to me the day of the procedure so I could explain my needs?

✓ Armrests on the toilet for support.

✓ Pillows to keep me upright during the time I'd be sitting there.

✓ A pediatric needle for the IV. (My veins are poor and this would save them time and me pain.)

✓ Two people to do the lifting when I needed to be moved, as I could not assist in any way.

✓ And my mother to stay with me until I went in for the procedure so I would never be alone.

I got everything I asked for, the exam went smoothly, and the staff thanked me for being so proactive. I continue to take responsibility for my health care, respectfully explaining what I need and offering simple solutions. That's key. It returns some of the control MS has taken away.

It turned out that a bowel management program solved the problems I was having. I've had two more colonoscopies since then. The inconvenience of the procedure is worth it because I know my colon is healthy.

Shelley Peterman Schwarz shares her 30 years of experience with progressive MS at meetinglifeschallenges.org.

*Today, much smaller amounts of liquid medication are more common.
—The Editor