MAST CELL ACTION

Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS) for teachers

What is Mast Cell Activation Syndrome?

Mast Cell Activation Syndrome (MCAS) is a condition which can develop in children or adults. Mast cells are part of the immune system and play a crucial role in defending the body against infections and other harmful substances. In people affected by MCAS, chemicals called mediators are released by their mast cells too frequently or abundantly, and/or in response to triggers that are not typically considered to be harmful, for example; foods or chemicals in the environment. This can lead to a wide range of symptoms that affect multiple parts of the body.

In MCAS, mast cells can be triggered by a wide range of stimuli, such as stress, food, medications, environmental factors, and even changes in temperature or humidity. This can cause a variety of symptoms, such as flushing, hives, swelling, abdominal pain, diarrhoea, headaches, and difficulty breathing. Symptoms can be mild or severe and vary from person to person.

You can find out more and download our free resources at www.mastcellaction.org

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MCAS Symptoms

MCAS symptoms are often unpleasant, debilitating and wide-ranging - affecting different parts of the body at the same time.

MCAS symptoms often come and go and their severity can fluctuate over time. In some cases, people may experience mild symptoms for a long time before seeing a sudden increase in the frequency or severity of their symptoms.

Sometimes there is an incident which triggers this sudden increase in symptoms - such as a severe infection or a medical procedure or operation.

The extent of symptoms for people living with MCAS can be substantial. The potential severity of symptoms along with the unpredictability of triggers can mean that the everyday lives of people with MCAS, their families and carers are considerably impacted.

Respiratory (lungs & breathing)

- Sore throat
- Hoarseness
- Wheezing
- Shortness of breath
- Throat swelling

Musculoskeletal

- Joint & muscle pain
- Osteoporosis (brittle bones)
- Loss of bone mass

Genital and urinary

- Genital pain or swelling
- Pain when urinating
- Vaginal pain, discharge or itching
- Bladder urgency or loss of control

Dermographic (skin)

- Flushing/redness
- Hives or wheals
- Itching with or without a rash
- Swelling

General

- Extreme tiredness
- Anaphylaxis, which can be life threatening

Nasal-ocular (nose and eyes)

- Nose congestion
- Eye watering and itching

Neurologic (brain and nerves)

- Headache
- Brain fog (memory and concentration difficulties)
- Numbness, pain or tingling skin
- Anxiety
- Behavioural issues, rages

Cardiovascular

- Chest pain
- Low blood pressure
- Fast heart rate
- Fainting or light-headedness

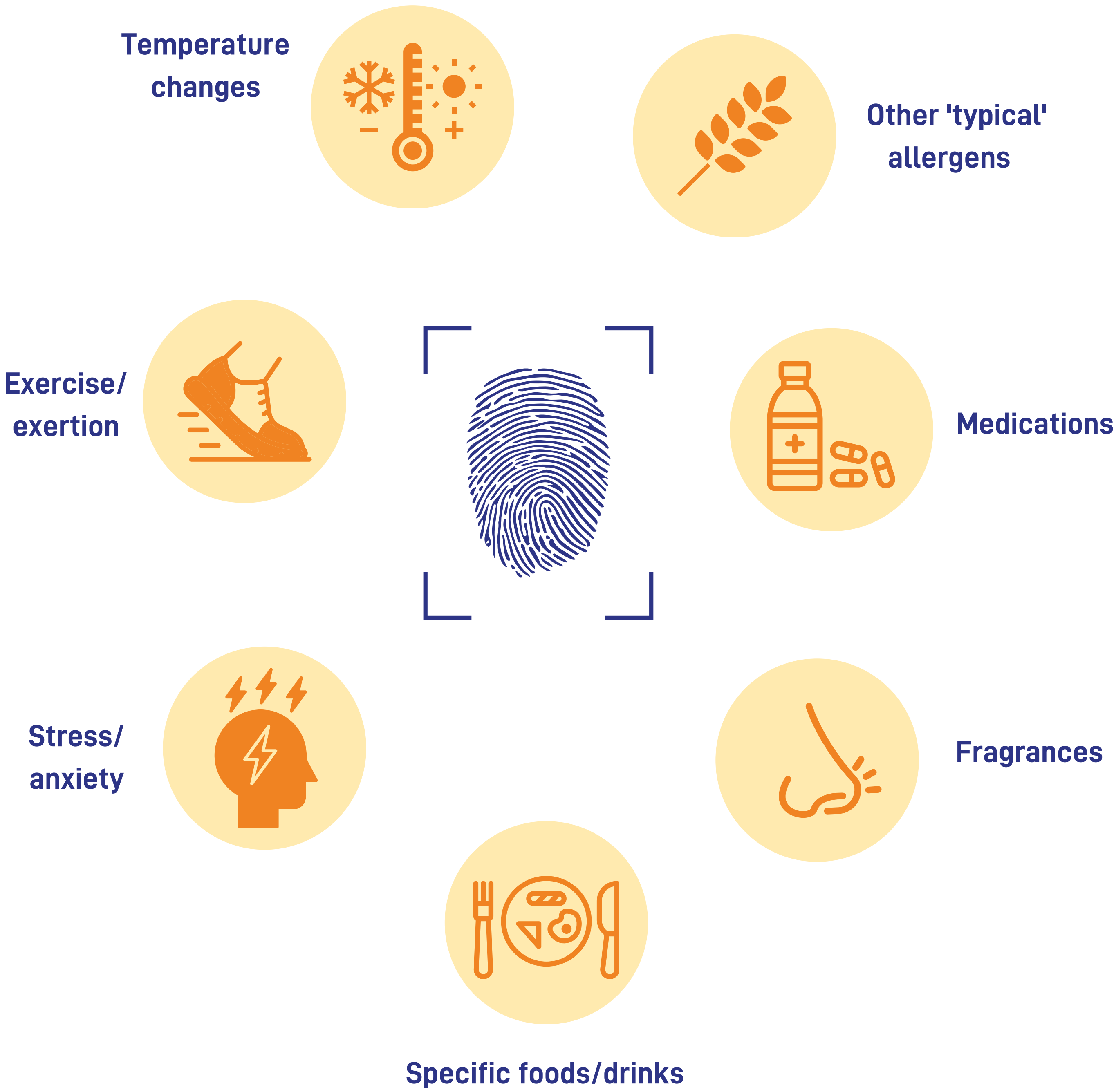
Gastrointestinal (digestive system)

- Bloating
- Stomach cramps or pain
- Reflux
- Feeling or being sick
- Diarrhoea
- Constipation
- Dumping syndrome
- Food allergies or intolerance

MCAS Triggers

While there are some common triggers, most people affected by MCAS struggle to identify all the triggers responsible for their episodes. And each individual has a unique set of triggers that cause their mast cells to overreact.

Common triggers include:



Temperature changes

Other 'typical' allergens

Exercise/ exertion

Medications

Stress/ anxiety

Fragrances

Specific foods/drinks

Young people with MCAS

Young people with MCAS may experience symptoms that interfere with their ability to focus, participate in class activities, or attend school regularly. Some young people may have mild symptoms, while others may experience severe symptoms that can impact their daily activities. Symptoms often fluctuate and flares of specific symptoms can continue for extended periods.

Young people with MCAS may be taking multiple medications to support the medical management of their condition, these medicines may need to be taken during school time either regularly or as part of their rescue plan.

Young people with MCAS may have to attend regular medical appointments and may need to rest at home when they are too unwell to attend school. This can lead to further disruption to their learning and supporting the child to catch up with any missed work can help to avoid any gaps in learning.

MCAS can also affect a young person's quality of life by limiting their ability to participate in physical activities, attend school regularly, and socialise with friends. It can also lead to anxiety and depression, as young people may feel isolated or misunderstood due to their symptoms.

How can teachers help?

Teachers and school support staff can work with parents and healthcare providers to develop a plan for managing symptoms and accommodations that may be needed in the classroom, such as providing extra breaks, allowing for a special diet, or using environmental controls to reduce exposure to triggers.

It is important for those caring for a young person with MCAS to be aware of the specific needs of young people with MCAS and to work closely with the student and their parents to ensure that appropriate accommodations and support are in place to help manage symptoms and minimise disruptions to their learning.

It is essential that everyone caring for a young person with MCAS has a good understanding of their condition and how to support their unique needs. Creating a plan to inform all staff including supply teachers and regularly keeping them up to date with any changes is vital to creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment for young people affected by MCAS.

Creating a safe environment

Creating a safe school environment for students with MCAS involves proactive adjustments to minimise exposure to potential triggers.

Learn about your student with MCAS, their symptoms, and triggers. This knowledge is crucial for recognising and responding to potential issues and helping to keep the young person safe..

Understanding that triggers can vary from person to person, it's crucial to identify and avoid specific triggers that cause symptoms for each student.

Tips for the classroom:

- Remove or avoid common triggers such as scented products, certain foods, and harsh chemicals. Ensure the classroom is free from perfumes, air fresheners, and scented cleaning products.
- Keep the classroom clean and free from dust and allergens.
- Ensure good ventilation by opening windows or using air purifiers with HEPA filters to reduce airborne allergens and irritants.

MCAS and stress

Creating a stress-free environment is also vital for students with MCAS as stress can be a trigger for many people.

Promote a calm and organised classroom, implement stress-reduction techniques, and be particularly vigilant during high-stress periods like exams.

Encourage open communication with students and their parents to ensure a thorough understanding of each student's specific needs and triggers.

Care plans

Many young people with MCAS will have a care plan designed to help keep them safe in a school environment. Familiarise yourself with the needs of the student with MCAS you are caring for to help you better accommodate their needs at school.

Rest breaks or ‘escape / time-out’ cards

Students with MCAS may need to take time out during the school day to rest, manage symptoms or avoid triggers that could exacerbate their condition.

Having a flexible approach and understanding from teachers ensures that students with MCAS can attend to their health needs promptly and return to class ready to learn. This strategy not only supports their physical well-being but also promotes a sense of security and inclusion within the school environment.

Exam concessions

Exam concessions can help students with MCAS to ensure they have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Concessions might include extended time, additional breaks, or a separate, quiet room to reduce exposure to potential triggers.

Extended time allows students to manage their symptoms without the added pressure of strict time limits, while additional breaks provide opportunities to rest, or take medication as needed. A separate room can help minimise exposure to environmental triggers such as allergens, temperature fluctuations, or stress.

Seating plans

Allowing students to help determine their place in seating plans can support them in avoiding triggers and managing their symptoms effectively. Strategic seating arrangements might include placing students near windows for better ventilation, away from known allergens, or close to exits for easy access during emergencies or breaks.

Ensuring they are seated in a comfortable, quiet area can also help reduce stress and minimise exposure to irritants such as strong odours or temperature changes.

Uniform adaptions

Some people with MCAS react to different fabrics, while others may react to pressure. Reactions to temperature change will also impact the clothing that many young people with MCAS can wear.

Students with MCAS who are triggered by wearing their school uniform may need adaptions to reduce the risk of skin reactions or overheating.

Common adaptions for students with MCAS include allowing them to wear their PE kit at all times, allowing them to remove their blazer (if worn) whenever needed, and allowing adaptions to uniform, such as permitting shorts or clothes made from materials which are safe for individual students or authorising them not to wear a school tie.

Top tip for supporting a student with MCAS

Be understanding and empathetic: Understand that a young person with MCAS may have good days and bad days, and their symptoms may vary. Be empathetic to their situation, and provide support as needed.

Provide a safe environment: Ensure that the classroom and school environment is safe for a young person with MCAS. This can include avoiding the use of scented products or cleaning agents that can trigger symptoms.

Be aware of triggers: Be aware of the triggers that can cause symptoms in a young person with MCAS, such as certain foods, chemicals, or environmental factors. If you notice that a student is experiencing symptoms, check if they have been exposed to any of their triggers.

Be flexible: Be flexible with work including homework and provide extra breaks if needed. This can help reduce stress and allow the student to manage their symptoms better.

Communicate with parents/carers and healthcare providers: Communicate with the young person's parents and healthcare providers to get a better understanding of their condition and learn how you can support them in the classroom.

Prepare for school trips and residentials: School trips can be a particularly worrying time for families. Creating specific risk assessments for individual trips with parents or carers can help to ensure the safest experience possible for the young person with MCAS.

Make your legacy a lifeline for people with MCAS, leave a gift in your will to Mast Cell Action.