

Mast Cell Activation Syndrome - A Primary Care Guide

What is MCAS?

MCAS is part of a spectrum of mast cell disorders involving abnormal function, non-clonal proliferation, accumulation, or activation of mast cells. It results in a wide range of allergic and inflammatory symptoms across multiple body systems. Patients with MCAS may react to various triggers, such as:

- Foods, pollen, and fragrances
- Medications and chemicals
- Temperature changes, exercise, and stress
- Hormonal fluctuations and infections

MCAS affects both children and adults and often has an unpredictable onset and is distinguishable from Systemic Mastocytosis, as it does not involve a detectable clonal proliferation of mast cells.

Symptoms

Symptoms of MCAS often wax and wane, with severity fluctuating over time. Symptoms may intensify following triggers such as infections, surgeries, or significant stress. Patients typically experience a variety of co-occurring symptoms across multiple body systems

Dermographic

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

Cardiovascular

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

Respiratory

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

Genital and urinary

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

Gastrointestinal

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

Neurological

- Headache, migraine
- Brain fog
- Numbness, pain or tingling skin
- Anxiety
- Behavioural issues, irritability

Musculoskeletal

- Joint & muscle pain
- Osteoporosis
- Loss of bone mass

Nasal-ocular

- Nose congestion
- Eye watering and itching

General

- Extreme tiredness
- Anaphylaxis

Diagnostic Criteria

Diagnosis requires a systematic approach:

1. **Clinical Symptoms:** Episodic or persistent, involving multiple body systems.
2. **Response to Treatment:** Symptom improvement with mast cell-targeted therapies.
3. **Mediator Tests:** Elevated mast cell mediators in blood or urine during symptoms.
4. **Exclusion of Other Conditions:** Differential diagnosis is essential as some symptoms overlap.

In some cases, a definitive diagnosis may not be possible, leading to a classification of "suspected MCAS." Diagnostic frameworks include Molderings et al. (2011), Valent et al. (2019), and Giannetti et al. (2021) and Diagnosis of mast cell activation syndrome: a global "consensus-2" L Afrin et al (2021)

Comorbidities

MCAS frequently coexists with other conditions. The exact relationship between MCAS and these conditions remains under investigation. Comorbidities include:

- Connective Tissue Disorders: Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS), Marfan Syndrome
- Dysautonomia: Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome (PoTS)
- Long Covid and Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS)
- Neurological Conditions: migraine, Autism

Management and Treatment

The primary goal of treatment is symptom management through a combination of self-care and pharmacological interventions. While no medications are currently licensed specifically for MCAS, various drugs can help stabilise mast cells and alleviate symptoms. Key management strategies include identifying and avoiding triggers, implementing dietary modifications, and utilising stress management techniques alongside appropriate pharmacological support.

Treatment typically follows a stepwise approach, starting with H1 and H2 antihistamines, followed by mast cell stabilisers, leukotriene receptor antagonists, and other adjuncts as needed. Dosing is often individualised, with some patients requiring higher-than-standard doses for symptom control. NICE Evidence Summary on Chronic Urticaria advises that the standard dose of antihistamine could increase up to 4-fold where required (incremental up-dosing in poor response, off-licence use)

Excipients in medications can act as triggers, leading to variable tolerability between different brands. Any changes in medication should be made one at a time, with patients keeping a symptom diary to monitor their response. If a patient experiences issues with a specific brand, prescribing an alternative formulation may improve tolerability. Although antihistamines are available over the counter, prescribing them may be more appropriate for patients requiring higher doses to ensure consistent access and adherence to treatment.

Category	Medication	Purpose	Primary Care Prescribable?
H1 blockers	Cetirizine	Reduce histamine effects	Yes
H2 blockers	Famotidine	Manage gastric symptoms	Yes
Leukotriene blockers	Montelukast	Address leukotriene effects	Yes
Mast cell stabilisers	Sodium cromoglicate	Prevent mediator release	Yes
Mast cell stabilisers	Ketotifen	Prevent mediator release	Yes
Corticosteroids	Prednisolone	Reduce inflammation symptoms	Yes
Bioflavonoids	Quercetin	Natural mast cell stabilisers	OTC
Vitamins	Vitamin C, Vitamin D, Probiotics, Magnesium	Support stabilising mast cells, control histamine levels & histamine production	OTC
Emergency medication	Adrenaline	Anaphylaxis management	Yes
	Low Dose Naltrexone	Mast cell stabilisers	No *

Onward referral: Consider referral to secondary care if symptoms are severe, significantly impact daily life, do not respond to first-line treatments or if specialist input is needed for further diagnostic evaluation & management.

** Evidence base is limited, but numerous reports suggest potential benefits.*

Visit The LDN Research Trust for more information & prescriber info: ldnresearchtrust.org

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Additional Information: For further guidance and resources, including more on testing and management, see the 'Health Professionals' tab on the Mast Cell Action website (www.mastcellaction.org). You can also join our professional network to receive important updates

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