

MS awareness MONTH

SHOOTING HOOPS WITH YOUR KIDS. Putting in your contact lenses in the morning. Cooking dinner for your family. Holding and playing with your toddler. These regular activities are sometimes impossible for Samantha Baumann, who has two children and Multiple Sclerosis (MS). "I don't like to be the person who says 'I can't do that.' Can't was not a word I was raised with."

Baumann said she's had to slow down but is still a very active mother.

TWO TO THREE TIMES as many woman as men have MS. No one knows why, but according to Rosalind Kalb, Ph.D, of the National Multiple Sclerosis Society, "It's just one of the many things we don't fully understand about MS. We assume it has to do with the differences in men and women's sex hormones, but scientists are looking at various clues that might help us answer that question."

MS affects people in many different ways, and often, many different ways in just one person. Common symptoms include weak muscles, "pins and needles" or burning sensations in legs or arms, vision problems, cognitive issues and fatigue.

While Baumann, who was diagnosed at age 26, has blurred vision, weak muscles, tremors and fatigue, another person may have memory problems, stiffness and slurred speech. Baumann said she has had every symptom of MS at one time or another, and even all of them at once.

"It's hard for people to understand that your symptoms vary from day to day," she explains. "One day I might be walking with a cane, and the next day I won't be using it and someone will say, 'oh, you must be feeling better!' That's not the case at all."

One of the most misunderstood aspects of MS is that, unlike other diseases where physical symptoms are present, MS includes symptoms that are not easily seen by others. "Particularly challenging are the invisible symptoms...fatigue, change in cognitive abilities or pain," said Kalb. "They're harder for kids and partners to understand."

Baumann thinks MS affects her more than it does her two daughters. "I'm not able to play with them

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as much as I want to, especially in the summer. My nine-year-old daughter is in basketball and I can't go out and shoot hoops with her. And it's hard to explain to my toddler why I can't hold her or play with her on the floor."

It helps when other family members step in to help out. In Baumann's family, her mother-in-law helps when she can and her husband has taken on more household responsibilities. "My husband is awesome. He doesn't care if the clothes aren't folded," said Baumann. "And he's had to become head chef because I never knew that cooking could be a physically draining task!"

Every hour of every day someone is diagnosed with MS.

Most people are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and 50. MS affects more than 400,000 people in the U.S. More than 900 people in Sedgwick County have MS, 450-600 of them women.

Because women tend to set the pace and rhythm of a family, a woman diagnosed with MS can throw the entire family off balance. It can be hard for a family to adjust around the disease.

"When someone in the family has MS, it affects everybody. When it's 'mom,' it may sometimes interfere with her ability to take care of things the way she wants to. The challenge for a woman is to figure out how to fill the role of wife and mother, while also taking care of herself," said Kalb.

For more information about multiple sclerosis visit www.nationalmssociety.org or call the local MS office at 316-264-1333. 🌐

~SUSAN DYER

