We have the technology

From shopping online to researching your family history or keeping accounts, computers are invaluable. But MS symptoms can make it hard to use the standard equipment. Anita Roberts finds out what help is available.

'If 100 people with MS came to me, we'd probably arrive at 70 different solutions', says Jan Mulligan. Jan is a senior consultant at the charity Abilitynet, the UK's largest provider of advice on making information technology work for people with disabilities. 'The thing to remember is, you are not stuck. If you find using a computer uncomfortable or difficult in any way, there is probably an answer.'

My computer, my way

MS can limit hand movements, making it difficult to use keyboards. And visual impairment can make it hard to read text and images laid out in standard settings. But you can customise your computer – you don't have to put up with the standard settings.

AbilityNet's website has a section called 'My computer, My way', which explains how to adjust your machine. If you aren't set up with web access yet, they can also give you advice over the phone or in person.

You can make it easier to read text or see images. If you find it hard to make the precise movements that are normally required to operate a computer, you can adjust your equipment such as your keyboard or mouse.

For example, in Windows, you can increase the size of typeface or change it to one that you find easier to read and you can create more space between the lines.

Many people find it hard to see their mouse pointer (the symbol on screen which represents your mouse) partly because it changes shape depending where it is. You can change this – the 'my computer' section explains how to make the pointer bigger.

Specialist equipment

If merely tweaking the standard equipment doesn't meet your needs, you can get specialist equipment. A simple wrist rest can make a big difference by stopping you over-extending your wrists. These are available from standard office suppliers.

Adjustable chairs or armrests can support your body while you sit at your desk. Or if you find it hard to strike the right key, you can get special keyboards with fewer or bigger keys. Keyguards are like a grid which fits over the keyboard and

'You don't have to put up with the standard settings'

ensures that you don't hit the wrong key by accident. There are even ones that can be operated by your knuckles, or the base of your hand. Some people find it hard to use the standard layout and prefer keyboards set out in alphabetical order.

For someone with MS positioning their fingers around a normal desk-based mouse, adjusting it half-an-inch, then clicking, may be difficult. A hand-track mouse, which is placed on the finger and operated with the thumb, might be easier. Some people find it easier to use a trackball mouse, which turns the

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conventional mouse upside down, so you move the ball rather than the whole thing. You can even control your PC with head movements alone, using an infra-red tracking system and a self-adhesive spot on your forehead.

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If you are visually impaired, the Royal National Institute for the Blind can advise on specialist software. You can get modifications that magnify the text, menus and icons on the computer screen up to 32 times. Or a program that reads the text on screen out loud to you.

Get advice before you buy

Every computer user is an individual, with their own needs. Yet the computer you might spend hours on each day is set up to meet the needs of an 'average' person, as if we were all the same height, sat at the same desk, with the same reach and grip.

Jan from AbilityNet says: 'On average, most people spend more time choosing a kettle than on choosing a set up for a computer. The essential point is to get advice before you go out and spend money on something that may not meet your needs.' ☐

› AbilityNet
www.abilitynet.org.uk
Telephone 0800 269545 or e-mail enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk

AbilityNet offers telephone advice and has centres in Cambridge, Edinburgh, Liverpool, London, Newcastle, Reading, Warwick, Weybridge and York.

You can download factsheets and 'skillsheets' from the AbilityNet website.

Factsheets include:
› Ergonomic Workstations
› Funding for an adapted computer
› Internet Hazards
› Keyboard and Mouse Alternatives
› Keyboard Shortcuts in Windows
› Keyboard – Single Handed Use
› VAT on Computer Equipment for Disabled People
› Vision Impairment and Computing
› Voice Recognition Software – An Introduction
› And many more

Skillsheets include:
› Changing Colours in Windows
› Making Text Easier to See
› Mouse – Slowing it Down
› Windows Magnifier
› And many more

› Royal National Institute of the Blind
www.rnib.org.uk
RNIB Technology Information Service
Telephone 0870 013 9555

RNIB is the UK's largest charity for visual impairment. It offers IT advice, sells equipment and runs training courses.

Software tips
Different computers will come with different set ups. Some of these tips might help many users of Microsoft Windows, a popular off-the-shelf program.
› You can increase the text size on your PC by going into Windows and clicking on *View*, then *Toolbars* and *Formatting*.
› You can make the text bigger on internet pages by going into your browser, choosing the *View* menu at the top of the page and clicking on the *Text Size* option.
› *Stickykeys* is useful if you can't use both hands to type. Go into *Windows* and click *Settings*, *Control Panel* and *Accessibility Options* to see a number of topics. Choose the *Keyboard* topic to find *Stickykeys*. This allows you to use the Shift, Control or Alt keys by pressing them one at a time, rather than holding down two keys simultaneously.
› *Filterkeys*, under the same *Keyboard* topic, allows Windows to ignore brief or repeated keystrokes or adjust the repeat rate.
› You can change the colour of the text and background in Windows by going to *Start*, then *Settings* and *Control Panel*. Choose *Display* and then click on *Appearance*.