

CONQUER

News for our community

Spring is Here. Join a Group and Start Fresh.



Spring has a way of inviting fresh starts. Windows open, routines shift, and there is a quiet pull to reconnect with ourselves and with others. For those living with myasthenia gravis, that pull often leads to something deeper than a seasonal reset. It leads to community.



Linda Loland

Myasthenia gravis is not a condition most people encounter in their day-to-day lives. For many, it is something you learn about quickly and unexpectedly, then spend time trying to understand, often without many people around you who truly recognize what

it feels like. As Linda Loland, Chicago North MG Support Group leader, put it, "There are so few of us with MG, and you feel like you're in an autoimmune information desert if you go it alone." Support groups shift that experience. They offer something both simple and meaningful: a space, virtual or in person, where understanding comes more easily. "With a support group you can commiserate, laugh, vent, whatever you feel like doing with a group of people who completely understand what it is like," Linda said.

For some, shared understanding becomes something they carry with them far beyond the meeting itself. Linda recalled a pivotal moment when her MG progressed into a crisis. In the middle of a frightening and uncertain experience in the ICU, something unexpected surfaced. "I remembered all the MG stories I had heard at the meeting. This was what several of them had been through."

Those stories, once simply introductions in a room, became something steadier. "It gave me so much peace and comfort to know I could also survive it," she said.

Support groups are not only about the hardest moments. They are also about the steady accumulation of knowledge, perspective, and connection over time. As SeAndrea Ferguson, Northwest Indiana Support Group leader, shared,

Continued on page 5

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Reimagining Our Annual Walk: Join Us for the Snowflake Shuffle



While the name is new, the heart of the event remains the same.

“As we move with the times, we have decided to integrate the snowflake that represents MG into our branding. The snowflake symbolizes the uniqueness of every MG journey. No two experiences are alike, and this new name reflects the strength and individuality of our community.”

— Alicia Peconio, Board President of Conquer MG.

Participate in person or virtually.

- **Support a Worthy Cause:** Every step you take and every dollar you raise goes directly towards supporting those affected by MG.
- **Challenge Yourself:** Push your limits and achieve new personal goals while making a positive impact.
- **Community Spirit:** Join a passionate community of individuals dedicated to making a difference.

Thank you to our sponsors!

Berens Park
493 N. Oaklawn Ave.,
Elmhurst, IL

8:30 AM

runsignup.com/snowflakeshuffleformg





Upcoming MG Support Group Meetings

Whether you have myasthenia gravis or care for someone with MG, you're encouraged to join the conversation. Sign up for a Support Group at myastheniagravis.org.

VIRTUAL GROUPS	2026 MEETING DATES	TIME	GROUP LEADER(S)
Thursday Monthly Anywhere MG Support Group (via Zoom)	Meets Monthly, 2nd Thursday May 14, June 11, July 9, Aug. 13, Sept. 10, Oct. 8, Nov. 12, Dec. 10	2:00 PM CT	Kelly Aiken
Men's MG Support Group	Meets Quarterly, 3rd Thursday June 18, Sept. 17, Nov. 19	6:00 PM CT	Gary Jackson and Dr. David Randall
Chicago South and West MG Support Group (via Zoom)	Meets Quarterly, 2nd Sunday May 17, Aug. 9, Nov. 8	1:00 PM CT	Joyce Holste and Victor Yipp
Women's MG Support Group	Meets Quarterly, 4th Thursday May 28, Aug. 27, Nov. 19	6:00 PM CT	Tammy Carter

IN-PERSON GROUPS	2026 MEETING DATES	TIME	LOCATION GROUP LEADER(S)
Springfield, IL MG Support Group	Meets Monthly, 3rd Sunday May 17, July 19, Aug. 16, Sept. 20, Oct. 18, Nov. 15 No meeting in January, June and December	2:00 PM	Kelly Aiken Parkway Christian Church 2700 Lindbergh Blvd. Springfield, IL
Chicago North MG Support Group	Meets Bi-Monthly, 2nd Saturday June 20, Aug. 8, Oct. 10, Dec. 12	10:00 AM	Linda Loland Levy Center 300 Dodge Ave. Evanston Library Room Evanston, IL
Northwest Indiana MG Support Group	Meets Quarterly, 2nd Saturdays May 9, August 8, October 10	10:00 AM	SeAndrea Ferguson Scherrerville-Dyer Library 1001 W. Lincoln Hwy. Scherrerville, IN

Questions about joining a support group? Reach us at info@myastheniagravis.org or call (800) 888-6208.



Become a Support Group Leader!

Are you interested in leading a support group in your area? We can help you get started!

Email us at info@myastheniagravis.org to lead a group. We are seeking support group leaders in **Chicago, Rockford, Peoria,** and the **Quad Cities.**



SeAndrea Ferguson

“This is an amazing way to meet others who have similar experiences. Support group members are able to empathize and share what could help them cope. Not only do they get support, but they can get resources about myasthenia gravis, medications, and new research.”

There is also a broader circle that forms around these spaces. “Family members are also welcome so they can gain insight and understand how myasthenia gravis affects their loved one,” SeAndrea added.

What keeps people coming back, though, is not just the information. It is the relationships. “We share a commonality in MG, but we also genuinely care for one another. When someone is having a challenging time, we help to lift them up. Everyone is caring and welcoming, and that makes a big difference,” she said.



Alicia Peconio

For others, the impact is quieter but just as meaningful. Alicia Peconio, Board President, describes the early days after diagnosis as a time filled with questions and uncertainty. “Having support especially early in your diagnosis is beyond

helpful as you have so many questions and are likely feeling overwhelmed. The support groups help you feel less alone and give you a safe, nonjudgemental place to be however you are in your diagnosis.”

Sometimes that is exactly what is needed. “On the days where I feel not my best, having a place that I can just be me and not be judged has been a game changer,” Alicia shared.

Not everyone arrives at a support group right away. Kelly Aiken, Board Member and Springfield and Anywhere MG Support Group leader, remembers her hesitation. “When I was first diagnosed, I was hesitant to go. It was my mom,

my caregiver, who talked me into going, and I was incredibly grateful.”



Kelly Aiken

What she found was immediate and lasting. “We were met by a group of loving individuals that let us know we were not alone. We have both been going faithfully ever since,” Kelly said.

Over time, she has watched others find their own way into the space. “I have seen people rally around those who need support. I have also seen people who just want to sit, observe, and take everything in.”

There is no single way to participate. Some people share openly. Others listen quietly. Both belong. “Whether they are a patient or caregiver, they can receive the level of support they need,” she added.



Julie McCracken

And sometimes connection takes a different path entirely. Julie McCracken, Board Member and Chair of the Patient Assistance Program, shared that she did not attend a formal support group at first. “I have never been to a group. I met my very first

person with MG at the infusion center at UIC years after my diagnosis.”

For her, community formed over time through relationships. “Joining Conquer MG introduced me to so many patients and spectacular people. This is my 'group' now, and I feel understood, blessed and uplifted.”

However it begins, that sense of connection matters. It shows up in conversations, in shared experiences, and in the quiet reassurance that someone else understands without needing much explanation.

As Linda put it, “Either virtual or in person, we need each other.”

This spring, consider taking that step. Join a group, connect with others, and start fresh.

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**SCAN TO
LEARN MORE**

gMG, generalized myasthenia gravis.

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MG Goings On

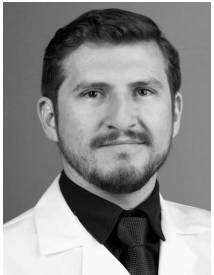
Pilot Award Announced



Dr. Marina Chiara Garassino of the University of Chicago has been named the MGNNet pilot awardee, a recognition of her work at the forefront of thoracic oncology research. Her focus on lung cancer and targeted therapies reflects a broader shift toward precision

medicine, where scientific refinement is steadily reshaping clinical possibility. The award supports her continued efforts to translate research innovation into improved patient outcomes.

New Medical Advisory Member Nomination



Dr. Carlos Lara of the University of Chicago and affiliated clinics has been nominated to join the Medical Advisory team, bringing expertise in neuromuscular medicine and academic neurology. His work centers on complex neuromuscular disorders, with

an emphasis on multidisciplinary care and clinical education. He also contributes to ongoing quality improvement and collaborative initiatives aimed at strengthening systems of patient care.

Join Our Board of Directors at Conquer MG!

Do you want to make a difference in the lives of people who live with a rare disease? Take on a leadership role with Conquer MG and help us in our mission to support those affected by myasthenia gravis.

Why Join Our Board?

- **Lead with Purpose:** Play a key role in shaping the future of our organization.
- **Make an Impact:** Use your skills and expertise to drive meaningful change.
- **Collaborate:** Work with a dedicated team committed to conquering MG.

Interested?

Contact us at info@myastheniagravis.org to learn more and express your interest.

Pregnancy and Myasthenia Gravis

Olivia Gutgsell, MD

Neuromuscular Medicine, Rush University Medical Center

The first step for women with myasthenia gravis (MG) who are considering pregnancy is to be prepared! We want to ensure that women desiring pregnancy are on the safest possible medications prior to conception. Prednisone and pyridostigmine (Mestinon) are considered the safest medications in pregnancy. Azathioprine and cyclosporine are also generally considered safe, while mycophenolate mofetil should be stopped prior to conception. Intravenous immunoglobulin (IVIg) and plasma exchange (PLEX) can also be continued during pregnancy. The safety of newer intravenous infusions and subcutaneous injections in pregnancy women with MG is not known.

During pregnancy, 1/3 of women with MG may experience worsening, typically during the first trimester. MG can even be unmasked or diagnosed for the first time in pregnancy! Uncommonly, MG respiratory crisis can occur. MG crisis can be treated with IVIg or PLEX.

Most pregnant women with MG are able to have a spontaneous vaginal delivery, though there may be a higher chance of Caesarian section. The OB and anesthesiology teams should be made aware of an MG diagnosis. Magnesium sulfate, an agent used for pre-eclampsia, should be avoided in patients with MG.

Post-partum, some women may experience MG flare. 10-20% infants develop transient neonatal MG due to transfer of antibodies across the placenta. Pyridostigmine is the standard treatment for transient neonatal MG, and it typically resolves within one month.

Your neuromuscular team is your partner to ensure a safe pregnancy and post-partum period for you and your baby.

References:

Massey, J. M., & De Jesus-Acosta, C. (2014). Pregnancy and myasthenia gravis. *Continuum* (Minneapolis, Minn.), 20(1 Neurology of Pregnancy), 115–127. <https://doi.org/10.1212/01.CON.0000443840.33310.bd>

Myasthenia Gravis Activities of Daily Living Chart

With a disease like myasthenia gravis, in which symptoms can vary greatly from day to day, it becomes important to track your MG symptoms so that you can have productive conversations with your medical providers and caregivers. Use this chart to track your daily and weekly symptoms and bring it with you to your next doctor appointment so that you can reflect on and recall how you've been feeling.

Score yourself (from 0= normal to 3=most severe) for each of the daily activities listed below.

	0	1	2	3	Your Score
Talking	Normal	Intermittent slurring or nasal speech	Constant slurring or nasal, but can be understood	Difficult to understand speech	
Chewing	Normal	Fatigue with solid food	Fatigue with soft food	Gastric tube	
Swallowing	Normal	Rare episode of choking	Frequent choking necessitating changes in diet	Gastric tube	
Breathing	Normal	Shortness of breath with exertion	Shortness of breath at rest	Ventilator dependence	
Impairment of ability to brush teeth or comb hair	None	Extra effort, but no rest periods needed	Rest periods needed	Cannot do one of these functions	
Impairment of ability to rise from a chair	None	Mild, sometimes uses arms	Moderate, always uses arms	Severe, requires assistance	
Double vision	None	Occurs, but not daily	Daily, but not constant	Constant	
Eyelid droop	None	Occurs, but not daily	Daily, but not constant	Constant	
Total Score (add items 1-8) = Max 24 points					

Remembering Bob Ratzel



Bob Ratzel died—for the first time—on April 9, 2026, after a fall in the home he shared for 51 years. He had lived for more than a decade with myasthenia gravis, an autoimmune disorder, and in leaving, he gave what he always had: himself to others.

He was predeceased by Connie, his loving wife of more than 46 years. Their children, Maria, Jonathan, and Kristen, along with eight grandchildren, carry forward his legacy.

Bob and Connie made their home in Morgan Park beginning in 1975, embracing both the neighborhood and its community life. A graduate of Niles West High School, Bob studied psychology at the University of Illinois and completed his training at UIC. With deep empathy and steady leadership, he served hundreds of men as a psychologist at Cook County Jail, later working with adults with developmental disabilities at Ada S. McKinley in Englewood and El Valor in Pilsen.

He went on to serve for 22 years as Executive Director of The Arc (formerly the National Association of Parents and Friends of Retarded Children). His commitment to service extended through volunteer leadership with the Oak Lawn United Way, helping raise support for more than 15 agencies. He also held leadership roles in two chambers of commerce and was named “Man of the Year” by the South Chicago Chamber of Commerce in 1993.

In 2016, Bob joined the board of the Conquer Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of Illinois, serving as treasurer until 2024.

A self-taught investor for more than 50 years, Bob also had a deep love of cultural gastronomy, following in the footsteps of his ancestor, Friederich Ratzel. He delighted in great wines, diverse foods, engaging people, and critically acclaimed films.

In later years, Bob both attended and facilitated senior classes through the Renaissance Academy at St. Xavier and Moraine Valley. With Connie, he co-taught courses exploring cooking Mexican recipes, travel, charitable giving, restaurant critique, and the realities of senior living. After recovering from intensive care and six months of therapy, Bob returned to teaching in 2026.

His work sparked a love of storytelling, leading him to perform with Chicago-area groups. Some of his stories were recorded by StoryCorps for the Library of Congress and remain available to hear.

Bob expected to die one more time—the final time someone mentions his name. In keeping with his sense of humor, he asked that someone please double-check his casket to be sure he is fully dead, having lived most of his life with claustrophobia.

He will be deeply missed by his family, friends, and community.

A Celebration of Life will be held on Sunday, June 14, from 1:00–4:00 PM at the Beverly Art Center (2407 West 111th Street, Chicago, Illinois 60655).

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Conquer Myasthenia Gravis in Chicago.

— About MG —

It strikes at any time and any age. Any income. Any ethnic background.

Myasthenia gravis (MG) is a highly misdiagnosed and undiagnosed autoimmune disease in which communication between nerve and muscle is impaired, causing weakness. Its primary symptoms are erratic, vary in severity, and occur in any combination such as: droopy eye lid(s); double or blurred vision; weak arms, hands, neck, face, or legs; difficulty chewing, smiling, swallowing, talking; undue fatigue, difficult breathing, or shallow respiration; or sense of balance difficulty. MG can masquerade as overwork, under-rest, anemia, vitamin deficiency, disease of the involved organ(s), or even emotional disturbances. Its cause is unknown; there is no cure.

Conquer myasthenia gravis was formed October 29, 1972, by a local group of caring individuals who wanted to help patients achieve the best possible quality of life while living with and managing their MG. We are a volunteer-led organization.

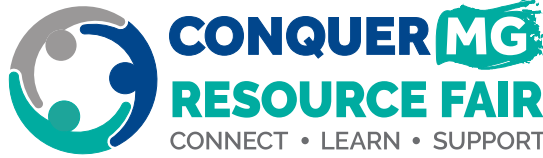
OUR MISSION: To facilitate the timely diagnosis and optimal care of individuals affected by myasthenia gravis and to improve their lives through programs of patient services, public awareness, medical research, professional education, advocacy, and patient care.

Conquer Myasthenia Gravis
4055 W. Peterson Ave., Ste. 105
Chicago, IL 60646
800.888.6208
www.myastheniagravis.org

Save the Date!

Fall Resource Fair!

Sunday, Sept. 13 Springfield, IL



Financial Assistance Programs



Conquer MG's **Patient Assistance Program** helps qualifying patients defray the cost of medical bills, prescription drugs, and durable medical equipment up to \$2,500 per person, per year. Eligible patients are those who live in Illinois, Indiana, or Wisconsin and can demonstrate financial hardship. You may

request the 2026 application by emailing info@myastheniagravis.org or find it on our website, www.myastheniagravis.org.

Our website lists other organizations that offer financial support for MG patients. Each organization has its own rules, and application periods vary. Pharmaceutical companies that manufacture specific medications may help with the cost of their medications. Check the individual company websites for details.

In Appreciation

WE ARE GRATEFUL to everyone who supports Conquer MG's mission. These donors recognized a loved one through their generous support between December 2025—March 30, 2026.

In Memory of Joe Acord

Clydette Barnfield
Terry Barnfield
Paul & Gail Dusch
Ranelle Hubele
Randall & Larna Kirsch
John & Karen Perryman
Dennis & Deloris Questell
Sheryl Woodham

In Memory of David Brown

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In Honor of Peggy Cashman

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In Memory of Beatrice Feinstein

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In Memory of Bonnie Ostarello

Diane and Jim Ostarello
John and Georgiandra (Gay)
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In Honor of Larry Slager

Joe and Dee (Joseph and
Darlyn) Schram

In Memory of Paul Watland

Linda Watland

If your tribute gift is not listed here, please accept our regrets and notify us in the office. We will recognize you in the next print newsletter.



About the Award

The Tracy Shackelford MG Service Award honors Tracy Shackelford, an important and compassionate member of the MG community who passed away in 2021 after a long battle with myasthenia gravis. This award was created in her name to recognize others who demonstrate a high level of service to the MG community.

Tracy Shackelford MG Service Award

Recognize someone you know who has given back to the MG community.

Nominate someone for the Tracy Shackelford MG Service Award!

Please write a 500-word explanation about this person's contribution to the MG community. Include information about why you think the contribution is meaningful or how it has a lasting impact on the MG community.

Also include:

- The nominee's full name
- Your name if you are nominating someone other than yourself
- A phone number for the nominator and nominee
- Both the nominator and nominee's email addresses
- Nominee's mailing address (only individuals who live in our service area are eligible)

Scan the QR Code to submit your nomination or email, info@myastheniagravis.org.

Persons nominated for this award will have consistently demonstrated qualities of compassion and service to the myasthenia gravis community.

The deadline to submit is Wednesday, May 20.


The winner of this award will be announced at this year's Annual Snowflake Shuffle for MG on Sunday, June 7.



Conquer Myasthenia Gravis
4055 W. Peterson Ave., Suite 105
Chicago, IL 60646

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