
The benefits of exercise

Regular recreation, active living and a personalised exercise program can help you to live well with MS. Exercise does not trigger a relapse (exacerbation) of MS or adversely affect the disease process. Regular exercise can help manage some of the symptoms of MS and decrease the effects of physical inactivity.

Regular physical activity can benefit everyone – not just people living with MS. Benefits include:

- reduces fatigue and increases stamina and fitness levels
- improves flexibility of joints
- improves coordination and balance
- improves and maintains muscle strength and tone
- helps in the management of mild spasticity (muscle stiffness)
- improves posture and reduces back and neck pain
- maintains blood pressure at normal levels and decreases the risk of heart disease
- reduces the risk of obesity, diabetes and osteoporosis
- elevates mood and reduces stress and depression
- builds self confidence and sense of wellbeing
- increases alertness and concentration
- provides opportunity for social interaction and support

Special exercise considerations in MS

- **Fatigue and MS.** People with MS usually experience fatigue sooner and take longer to recover than people who do not have MS. Fatigue may occur and continue for several hours or even into the next day. Start with low intensity exercise and duration and build up slowly. If fatigue lasts longer than 30 to 60 minutes, modify your exercise session by reducing the intensity and duration.
- **Temperature.** Small increases in environmental or body temperature can temporarily increase physical and sensory symptoms. Try to keep cool while exercising by wearing loose clothing, drinking water before and during exercise, exercising in an air-conditioned or well ventilated area, and wearing a wet cloth or cool band around your neck.
- **Sensory symptoms.** Sometimes the intensity of or number of sensory symptoms (e.g. numbness, tingling, pins and needles or blurred vision) can increase during exercise. These changes can be unavoidable but, if tolerable, you can continue exercising. An increase in symptoms usually resolves within a short time after the exercise session. You may need to decrease the level of exercise intensity if temporary worsening of symptoms does not resolve within 30 minutes after exercising.

Starting an exercise program

Consult your doctor, a physiotherapist or trained fitness instructor before commencing a new exercise regime. Ask your doctor what form of exercise is best for you and if there are any health risks which may affect your ability to exercise safely.

A physiotherapist or trained fitness instructor can help you manage the physical symptoms of MS (e.g. muscle weakness, spasm, fatigue, pain, altered balance, or tremor) and can design an exercise program suited to your individual needs and preferences. Exercises and equipment may need to be adapted to ensure your safety.

Precautions may need to be taken to minimise any health risks or temporary worsening of symptoms. For example, avoid strenuous exercise during a relapse (exacerbation) of MS, an infection or fever, or if you are feeling generally unwell. You may need to reduce or stop exercising at these times, which can be discouraging. However, you can restart your exercise program at a lower intensity and duration and gradually build up your levels of fitness, flexibility and strength again.

Tips for staying motivated

- **Choose an activity you enjoy**, that is convenient and meets your budget.
- **Set small and realistic exercise goals**, beginning slowly and doing more as you become fitter and stronger.
- **Establish a 'contract'** with someone you know and who will encourage you to stick to your agreed exercise plan and goals.
- **Plan ahead** and schedule time for exercise in your diary.
- **Find a variety of ways to exercise**, so that you continue to find exercising fun and enjoyable.
- **Don't overdo it.** When you feel fatigued, stop, rest or change exercises.
- **Avoid overheating** by wearing light clothing and exercising during the cooler parts of the day or in a cool environment.
- **Use a buddy system.** Arrange to exercise with your family, a friend or as part of a group.
- **Record your progress** and achievement of your short-term exercise goals.
- **Reward your efforts**, particularly in the first 6 to 12 weeks, which can often be the most difficult when starting a new exercise program.

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