

Fitness exercise and multiple sclerosis

The benefits of fitness exercise

Fitness exercise (also referred to as aerobic or cardiovascular exercise) uses large muscle groups in the body and is performed at moderate levels of intensity for a considerable amount of time. Examples of fitness exercise include fast walking, cycling, swimming and aqua aerobics.

There are many benefits of fitness exercise, such as reduction in fatigue and prevention of some diseases (e.g. osteoporosis).

Regular fitness exercise also improves heart and lung function, circulation to the feet, legs and hands, flexibility, and muscle strength and tone. In addition, increased fitness can enhance quality of sleep, mood and sense of wellbeing and can assist with a regular bowel routine.

Getting started with a fitness exercise program

Certain fitness exercises may not be suitable for all people with multiple sclerosis (MS). It can be helpful to seek the assistance of a physiotherapist or trained fitness instructor for an exercise program that is adapted to your needs.

The following guidelines are not intended to replace the individual advice of your doctor, a physiotherapist or trained fitness instructor but may help to get you started.

- **Choose an exercise you enjoy** and that suits your lifestyle.
- **Start exercising at a slow rate**, if commencing a new exercise program. Gradually build up over several months to reach 20 to 30 minutes each session.
- **Break your exercise up into two to three sessions of shorter duration**, if fatigue prevents you from doing one 30-minute session in a day. For example, exercise for 10 minutes on three occasions throughout the day.
- **Exercise at a moderate intensity** (or at a level suited to your current ability) to gain the most benefit. A moderate level of activity noticeably increases your heart rate and breathing rate. You may sweat, but you are still able to carry on a conversation. You can talk, but you can't sing.
- **Take steps to minimise the temperature increase** that occurs with exercise as this will help minimise fatigue.
- **Avoid fitness exercise during a relapse** of MS symptoms or any other illness. When you restart your fitness exercise program, take care to reduce the length of time and lower the level of intensity and build it up slowly.
- **Be aware of sensory symptoms** such as pins and needles, numbness and blurred vision, which may increase during exercise but will disappear within 20 to 30 minutes of completing the exercise session (in most cases).
- **Consult your doctor to check on any precautions you need to follow** before commencing a new fitness exercise program. This is particularly important if you have not done regular exercise for several years, you have other medical problems, or you are a female over 55 or male over 45.

Things to consider when exercising for fitness

- Wait at least one to one and a half hours after eating before you exercise.
- Empty your bladder prior to exercising.
- Remember to warm up beforehand for two to five minutes. Warm ups can include stretches or commencing the exercise at a slower pace.
- After warming up, gradually increase the pace and intensity of exercise until you are exercising at the desired level.
- Monitor your heart rate at regular intervals while exercising and decrease the intensity of exercise if needed.
- Work sufficiently hard so that your breathing becomes faster and deeper, but not so hard that you feel breathless or are unable to speak in short sentences while exercising.
- As your level of fitness increases you will need to work harder to get your heart and breathing rate up. Adjust exercise levels accordingly.
- Cool down at the end of the exercise session. Cooling down involves reducing the level of activity in preparation for stopping the exercise and stretching muscles that have been working during the exercise session.
- Exercise regularly, three to five times a week, and preferably every day. If you cannot manage to exercise frequently, just exercise as often as you can. Exercising for fitness twice a week has been shown to be beneficial.

Minimising body temperature while exercising for fitness

- It is important to minimise your body temperature as any increase in temperature can result in a temporary increase in physical and sensory MS symptoms and fatigue.
- Exercise during the cooler part of the day or in a cool environment.
- Exercise at a lower pace during warm conditions and have regular breaks.
- Wear light, loose clothing such as cotton.
- Use a cooling shirt or wet cloth wrapped around the wrist or neck.
- Drink water before and during exercise, particularly if exercising over a longer period (e.g. on a bush walk or bike ride).
- Exercise in a ventilated or air-conditioned area.
- Do not exercise if feverish or feeling unwell. Consult your doctor before exercising if you are having an exacerbation.

For information about MS and MS Australia – ACT/NSW/VIC services:

MS Connect™: 1800 042 138

Email: msconnect@msaustralia.org.au

Web: www.msaustralia.org.au/actnswvic

Disclaimer: Information contained in this fact sheet, prepared by Multiple Sclerosis Limited, is intended to provide useful and accurate information of a general nature for the reader but is not intended to be a substitute for legal or medical advice. Multiple Sclerosis Limited is not recommending medical or legal advice and readers must seek their own medical or legal advice as may be appropriate. Printing and photocopying this publication in its original form is

permitted for educational purposes only. Reproduction in any other form without written permission is prohibited.