

FATIGUE

EXERCISE AND DIET



Multiple Sclerosis Society
of SA & NT

Exercise and diet are important factors to consider when maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise and a balanced, healthy diet has many benefits including helping you to manage the fatigue you experience. As fatigue is experienced differently by each person, different strategies may be successful. For this reason it is important to trial a range of strategies in order to identify those that work for you. Although use of the following strategies is unlikely to eliminate fatigue, they aim to enable you to manage the fatigue you experience more effectively.

The benefits of exercise

Regular exercise is important for everyone, including people with MS. Exercise has many benefits including improving fitness and stamina, maintaining and/or increasing muscle strength, improving balance and coordination and reducing the risk of osteoporosis and heart disease. Exercise can also help to improve a range of MS symptoms including balance and coordination

difficulties, muscle weakness, spasticity and fatigue.

Many factors can affect a person's experience of fatigue such as loss of muscle strength (deconditioning), depression and sleep disturbance. Regular exercise can also help to improve these factors, thereby reducing the experience of fatigue.

Although it is likely you will feel tired for a period of time after exercise the benefits commonly outweigh this factor. It is important to monitor how you feel after exercise as it may be necessary to reduce the amount of exercise time if you are continually tired.

Managing fatigue during exercise

Fatigue affects up to 75% of people with MS and is often reported as the biggest barrier to exercise. Managing fatigue whilst undertaking regular exercise is very important to ensure that you can benefit from the increased energy levels derived from exercising.

Exercise needs to be done in a way which will give you more energy in the long run.

When many people start (or return to) exercise, they often try to do too much too soon. This is a common mistake and 'overdoing it' often makes people feel more fatigued.

It is important to start slowly, exercise within your limits and gradually build your exercise tolerance. This way you will improve your fitness.

Listen to your body

Listening to your body during the course of the day and during exercise is important. It can tell you how much exercise to do, when you have had enough and what time of day you should exercise. Some helpful tips are:

- Keep an exercise diary to help you keep track of how much you've done and what effects it had.
- Try to do a little bit of exercise every day – even when you are tired. A little bit is better than none.
- Learn to recognize the early signs of fatigue (eg a change in visual or sensory symptoms) so you can take a break or change your activity.

Exercise strategies to help manage fatigue

- Aim to exercise at the time of day when you have a high energy level.
- Aim to undertake regular exercise sessions each week but keep them short to reduce resting time needed following exercise.
- Aim to slowly build up the length of time you exercise for.
- If possible exercise in the morning when the temperature is cooler.
- Don't overheat as this can severely increase fatigue.
- Remember to drink lots of water to maintain fluid levels and body temperature.
- Take rest breaks as needed and stop as soon as you begin to feel fatigued.
- Vary activities to prevent boredom.

Types of exercise activities

There are many forms of exercise from which you can choose, ranging from walking, to swimming, golf, yoga and tai chi. Each of these has a range of benefits, for example, swimming stretches and strengthens muscles while increasing fitness and endurance.

You may need to adapt these activities to suit your abilities.

Alternatively there are other physical activities which you can undertake in the privacy of your own home which produce similar benefits. These can include gardening, vacuuming, hanging out the washing and walking involved in everyday activities.

These activities can also be slowly increased in order to build up tolerance and fitness.

To develop an exercise program suitable for your needs please contact a physiotherapist at the MS Society.

Deciding what form of activity to undertake

Deciding which type of exercise to undertake is a personal decision and should be based on the abilities, needs and goals of the individual. It is important to consult with your GP before making any major exercise changes.

Keeping motivated

Starting to exercise is important but it is only part of the battle – continuing to exercise regularly is perhaps even more difficult.

Some ideas to keep motivated:

- Congratulate yourself on what you've done, rather than

beating yourself up for what you haven't done

- Do something you enjoy
- Join an exercise group or sporting club. Most people find exercising in groups more fun and it can be a great social opportunity'
- Make regular appointment times to exercise so it becomes part of your routine
- Keep an exercise diary or mark off days on the calendar when you've exercised
- Listen to music while you exercise
- Set realistic short term and long term goals
- Know that what you are doing is helpful to your body

MS and diet

There are many different diet therapies which have been promoted for the management of MS. A number of these are based on scientific evidence while others are not.

While some literature might appear very convincing it is often not supported by qualified nutritionists and dieticians for use by people with MS. If you decide to alter your diet consider any changes carefully and be aware that some diets can be harmful as

they may include potentially toxic amounts of certain vitamins, or exclude important nutrients needed for essential body function. It is important that your dietary requirements are assessed individually with a health professional so a balanced diet which best suits your physical and lifestyle needs can be achieved.

The benefits of a healthy diet

A healthy well-balanced diet is widely recommended in the management of MS and can help to alleviate fatigue, maintain strength, boost the immune system and support healthy bladder and bowel functions. A balanced diet provides adequate energy, nutrients and dietary fibre to promote good health.

It is also important to maintain body fluids by aiming to drink 2 litres of water per day.

A healthy diet doesn't mean you have to deprive yourself of the foods you like, but rather aim to balance your diet.

Monitor your intake of unhealthy foods and aim to maintain a suitable body weight. It is important to consult with your GP before making any major diet changes.

Quick meal preparation tips

Fatigue can lead to loss of appetite and because of the effort and energy required to prepare meals, your interest in preparing food decreases.

Below are some tips to assist meal preparation:

- Have prepared meals delivered
- Use frozen prepared meals
- Prepare extra food when cooking and freeze the remainder to use as a second meal
- Buy pre chopped or frozen vegetables
- Keep a stock of basic foods which require little preparation such as pasta or noodles and sauce

Other fatigue management strategies

Additional information sheets are available covering a range of fatigue management strategies.

These include the [Fatigue Information Sheet](#), [Fatigue Treatments – Making Informed Decisions](#), [Keeping Cool](#), [Managing Stress](#), [Fatigue Self Assessment](#), [Planning Your Day and Managing Stress](#).

Further information

If you have any questions or require further information about MS fatigue and its management please contact your GP or health professional at the MS Society. Additionally if you would like to discuss a personalised exercise program or diet please contact a health professional at the MS Society.

The Society has more information sheets included in the symptom series as well as a Healthy Living and Managing MS Series. Please see the website for more details.

References

MS Society Ireland, Information sheet Diet http://ms-society.ie/uploads/File/dietsheet_nov04.pdf

UK Multiple Sclerosis Society, Diet and Nutrition
http://www.mssociety.org.uk/downloads/MS_Essentials_11_Diet_and_nutrition_1209_-_web.e309a170.pdf

Exercise and physiotherapy
http://www.mssociety.org.uk/downloads/MS_Essentials_21_Exercise_and_physiotherapy_0609_-_web.d512ec7e.pdf

Multiple Sclerosis International Federation

MS in focus Issue 5 Healthy Living

http://www.msif.org/en/resources/msif_resources/msif_publications/ms_in_focus/issue_5_healthy_living/index.html

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