

DIET



Multiple Sclerosis Society
of SA & NT

This information sheet is directed at helping you to make sound nutritional choices to put you on the path to wellness. Nutrition is an enormous topic and this information sheet assumes a basic knowledge of healthy eating. Refresh your knowledge by looking at the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating listed in the references.

There is considerable debate about diet for people with MS. The link between diet and MS is not proven, but it is generally accepted that people with MS are well advised to follow a balanced healthy diet.

It is important that your diet is assessed by a dietician so that a balanced diet that suits your physical and lifestyle needs can be achieved.

A healthy well-balanced diet

- helps to alleviate fatigue, maintain strength and supports healthy bladder and bowel functions.
- provides adequate energy, nutrients and dietary fibre to promote good health

- is particularly important for people with unpredictable conditions like MS.

Diet is a lifestyle factor that impacts on any illness and taking control of your diet is a major step in achieving wellness. Eating your way to wellness through healthy food might be the best advice that you receive.

A balanced diet

A balanced diet will supply your body with the nutrients you need to be as active and healthy as possible. To achieve this you should:

- include items from all 5 food groups – carbohydrates, fruit and vegetables, dairy products, meat or fish and fat.
- eat a healthy breakfast every day to give your body energy for the day ahead.
- grill, steam, bake or poach food instead of frying and trim meat of any visible fat before cooking.
- eat smaller amounts of meat. Try 'meatfree Mondays'.
- use a non stick frypan to cook without oil or butter.
- optimise nutritional value by eating

fresh food wherever possible, cook vegetables very lightly or eat them raw.

- focus on wholegrain breads, pasta, rice and other whole grain products instead of white, refined and highly processed products so that you get the benefit of the whole grain that is packed with essential vitamins, minerals and fibre. Whole grains are more filling which helps if you want to manage your weight.
- avoid processed foods because they are high in trans fats, sugar and salt.
- learn how to read food labels so that you can tell the difference between a healthy product and a convenient one. The ingredients and nutritional values of an enormous database of foods are listed at <http://eatingsafe.com/>.
- have regular blood tests to check that your diet is providing essential nutrients.
- choose Australian food products over imported and South Australian and local whenever you can. Your food is more likely to be fresh and supports your local farmers.
- choose healthy fats – olive oil, vegetable oil, avocado and nuts.

The importance of fat

Fat is important because it contains concentrated energy. The healthiest choices are monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats. Look for foods with very little or no saturated fats and avoid trans fats – both increase cholesterol levels. All fats are higher in calories. Many low fat products are higher in sugar and not lower in calories.

Monounsaturated fats are found in olive and canola oils, most nuts and avocados.

Polyunsaturated fats are found in plant based oils eg safflower, sunflower and sesame oils.

Polyunsaturated fats have been the focus of the majority of studies into diet and MS. Polyunsaturated fats are further divided into 2 important forms: omega 3 essential fatty acids and omega 6 essential fatty acids. It is important to achieve a balance between these two groups, so that containing both types should be included in your diet.

- **Omega 3 essential fatty acids** are present in oily fish such as salmon and mackerel, green leafy vegetables and linseed oil.
- The main **omega 6 essential fatty acid** is linoleic acid, found in the oils of seeds and nuts, such as sunflower or safflower oils. The main benefit for MS has been found with omega 6 essential fatty acids.

Saturated fats are found in meat, animal fats, coconut and palm oil and dairy products such as butter and cheese. Take away/packaged foods generally are high in saturated fat. Research has shown a link between a high intake of saturated fat and an increased risk of heart disease and certain cancers, so a healthy choice is to reduce your intake of saturated fat by choosing low fat milk, cheese and yogurt.

Trans fats are found in hard vegetable fats eg margarine and foods made from them such as biscuits, cakes, pies, sweets, snack foods and chips.

Check food labels for low fat foods and fat types.

MS Diet

There is no conclusive evidence that any particular diet is wholly beneficial to people with MS however there are vitamins, minerals and essential fatty acids that can help the nervous system. These are:

- Omega 3 and omega 6 essential fatty acids
- Vitamin B12, found in red meat, oily fish and dairy
- Antioxidants such as Vitamins A, C and E and those in fresh fruit and vegetables.

There is evidence that dietary fat plays a part in the development and progression of MS and that

managing your intake of dietary fat might improve the condition of people with MS.

Swank and the Best Bet diet

A number of studies have established a direct relationship between the risk of MS and saturated fat.

Professor Roy Swank's research on 144 patients over a 34-year period was published in The Lancet (1990). The study showed that those who followed the diet had not shown any significant deterioration of their condition over a 34-year period, while those that did not follow the diet did significantly deteriorate over the same period. 45 of the bad dieters had died by 34 years of MS-related causes. In summary the diet restricts daily fat and meat intake and increases omega 3 intake. More information is at <http://www.swankmsdiet.org/>.

The Best Bet diet was developed by Dr Ashton Embry based on the hypothesis that MS is caused by food proteins escaping from a leaky gut that then causes the immune system to malfunction. His diet is a strict exclusion diet, excluding dairy and gluten in the main.

Vegetarian/vegan diets

There is debate over the value of eliminating all meat from your diet or eliminating all animal products and becoming vegan. Ultimately it is a

personal choice. Vegetarians and vegans need to plan their diet carefully to ensure that they cover all the essential nutrients, especially Vitamin D, B12 and fish oil.

Eating out

Meals at restaurants and family and friends can be more challenging. Don't hesitate to specify your dietary requirements and specify how a meal is cooked— eg ask for food to be steamed instead of fried. If it's easier, take your own meal to family/friends.

Water and other liquids

Fluid intake is essential to prevent dehydration. Too little fluid can increase the risk of urinary infections, fatigue and constipation and thus worsen MS symptoms. You should aim for 1.5lt of fluid (water, tea, coffee, milk, fruit juice) a day. Caffeine fortified drinks such as coffee, tea, cola and Red Bull are best in moderation as caffeine can irritate the bladder. Alcohol should be consumed in moderation and some think that alcohol should not be a part of the diet of a person with MS. In addition alcohol is a high source of calories. Alcohol should not be taken with certain medications, including antidepressants.

Vitamins and supplements

Vitamins and minerals have vital functions and complex relationships with each other, eg you can get iron from plant sources so long as Vitamin C is also present at the time of consumption.

A decision to take supplements is a personal one. The balance of opinion suggests that at the least people with MS should take 20g daily Omega3 fatty acid supplements, Vitamin D supplements of 5000IU daily, a B group supplement and B12 supplements daily at 25 – 30 mcgs. High doses of Vitamin B12 were once thought to help with MS but today it is recognized that this will do little more than produce expensive urine. Avoid supplements that claim to boost immune function because this can be a problem in MS which partly results because of a misdirected immune attack on myelin within the central nervous system. Do not exceed the recommended daily of any vitamins and supplements.

Weight management

Weight loss can occur with reduced appetite and will decrease your resistance to infection. If you do not consume enough calories then you will not have the energy to get through the day and you will not be able to maintain muscle strength.

Weight gain can be a consequence of fatigue and mobility restrictions. Being overweight is a contributing factor to numerous other medical conditions and in itself can make it more difficult to get around. Weight gain may not be directly linked to your MS so seek a dietician's advice.

Aim for a healthy BMI

<http://www.mydr.com.au/tools/bodymass> for good health.

Symptoms and diet

Buying and preparing food can be more difficult if you are affected by **fatigue**. Prepare meals ahead and freeze meals for days when you are too tired to cook, ask for help preparing foods and use energy saving utensils and gadgets such as choppers, blenders and dishwashers. Microwaves can be a healthier way of cooking, time saving, easier to keep clean and they don't heat up the kitchen. Utilise food home delivery services for prepared meals (choose healthy ones – many are high in fat) and food items. Buy precut and frozen vegetables and trimmed meat if you are too tired to cut and chop.

Many people with **bladder issues** reduce their intake of fluid to limit their trips to the toilet, but this is not advised. Low amounts of

concentrated urine can encourage infection and low liquid intake can also cause constipation.

Swallowing difficulties or dysphagia can exist for some people with MS and may be fatigue related or a result of poor co-ordination. Try to take smaller mouthfuls, mash or mince foods and choose soft foods. Seek detailed advice from therapists at the Society.

Constipation, weight gain and urinary tract infections often occur for people with MS who have **mobility**

limitations. If this is the case for you then ensure that your diet has a good proportion of bulky low fat high fibre foods eg bananas, fruit, whole grains and fluids.

Tremor can affect your nutritional needs or your approach to eating. Constant tremor uses up calories so you may need to eat more to avoid weight loss or worsening fatigue.

Severe **spasticity** and postural difficulties can also lead to poor diet and in severe cases, malnutrition. Seek advice on adaptive aids from staff at the Society.

Visual problems such as double vision or blurring can make food preparation more hazardous and time consuming. Adaptive aids can reduce the issues.

If you are interested in more information

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

References

Wahlqvist M (ed) Food and Nutrition Food and Health systems in Australia and New Zealand 3rd edition 2011

Dept of Health and Ageing the Australian Guide to Healthy Eating 2008

[http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/E384CFA588B74377CA256F190004059B/\\$File/fd-cons.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/E384CFA588B74377CA256F190004059B/$File/fd-cons.pdf)

Nutrition Australia

The Healthy living Pyramid

<http://www.nutritionaustralia.org/national/resource/healthy-living-pyramid>

Go for 2&5

www.gofor2and5.com.au

Direct MS

Best Bet Diet <http://www.direct-ms.org/sites/default/files/TakeControlOfMS.pdf>

Multiple Sclerosis International Federation (MSIF)

MS In Focus Issue 5 2005 Healthy Living

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

Overcoming MS - Dr George Jelinek's website

www.overcomingmultiplesclerosis.org/Recovery-Program/Program-Overview/

The Food Coach

www.thefoodcoach.com.au/

Dietician Association of Australia

www.daa.asn.au/

MS Active Source

MS Diet and nutrition

www.msactivesource.com/msasProject/msas.portal/_baseurl/threeColLayout/MSASRepository/en_US/msas/home/wellness/ms-diet-nutrition/index.xml

Multiple Sclerosis Society (Canada)

Healthy Eating: A Guide for people with MS

www.mssociety.ca/en/pdf/eating.pdf

MS Trust (UK)

Diet Fact Sheet www.mstrust.org.uk/downloads/diet.pdf

Multiple Sclerosis Society (UK)

http://www.mssociety.org.uk/about_ms/everyday_living/diet_and_nutrition/index.html

National Multiple Sclerosis Society (US)

Momentum Fall 09 Healthy Living Diet the skinny on the Swank MS Diet

<http://www.nationalmssociety.org/multimedia-library/momentum-magazine/back-issues/momentum-fall-2009/index.aspx>

Multiple Sclerosis Resource Centre (MSRC)

Nutriton <http://www.msrc.co.uk/index.cfm/fuseaction/show/pageid/780>

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MS House, 110 Reservoir Road, MODBURY SA 5092

Phone 8396 0044

Fax: (08) 83 96 0184

Toll Free: 1800 812 311

Email ms@ms.asn.au

Website www.ms.asn.au