

# HEALTHY LIVING



Multiple Sclerosis Society  
of SA & NT

Healthy living with MS can have many different meanings – it can simply be refraining from unhealthy habits such as smoking, or it can cover a wide range of activities and practices to promote fitness and overall wellness. Wellness is a combination of physical, emotional, spiritual and social well being that can be achieved in the presence of a chronic illness such as MS.

For a person with MS the path to wellness is more than treatment of the disease. Equally important are health promotion and prevention strategies of adopting a healthy diet, getting adequate Vitamin D through sun exposure, regular exercise, taking control of your life and managing depression.

Recreation activities that keep you active, gentle exercise like yoga/Pilates and aquatic exercise and travel are also part of a healthy lifestyle. Pet therapy is another way of increasing activity levels, managing stress and contributing overall to a well balanced healthy life.

## Diet

There is considerable debate about diet for people with MS, with specific diet therapies promoted for the management of MS. The link between diet and MS has not been 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 best suits your physical and lifestyle needs can be achieved.

A healthy well-balanced diet 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.

Monitor your intake of unhealthy foods and aim to maintain a healthy body weight.

## **Vitamin D**

Increasing evidence is showing a strong correlation between sun exposure and MS. In other words there is less MS in countries where there is more sun. Sunlight stimulates the production of Vitamin D which has an important role on immune health. Sun exposure is the best way of getting Vitamin D. 10 – 15 minutes of sun 3 to 5 times a week is considered optimum. A simple blood test can determine your Vitamin D level. If it is low then the easiest way of increasing your Vitamin D is to increase your exposure to sun, or take Vitamin D supplements.

## **Taking control**

As the person with MS you have a central role in understanding and managing your MS and making informed decisions about your needs and care. Many people who recover from a serious medical condition are those who see illness as a challenge and a chance for personal growth. They deal with their illness actively and are not passive recipients of doctors' advice and treatments. They seek out information about managing MS and have the determination to do whatever it takes to get well.

## **Exercise**

Regular exercise is important for everyone, including people with MS. Exercise has many benefits including improving fitness and stamina, improving balance and coordination, maintaining and/or increasing muscle strength 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.

## **Yoga**

Yoga helps relieve stress, encourages better breathing and aids sleep. The relaxation techniques of yoga can help combat fatigue, and increase a feeling of well being.

## **Aquatic exercise**

An aquatic exercise program can have many benefits for people with MS. The warmth of the pool can help to relax tight muscles and the water buoyancy can make exercise much easier if you have muscle weakness or balance problems.

### **Mind matters – mental health**

Coping with stress can be difficult and stress impacts negatively on MS symptoms. Depression, whether it is often 'feeling down' or severe clinical depression that can last for months is common for people with MS. Depression does not mean that you are weak of character nor is it shameful or something that you can 'snap out of'. It needs treatment by a medical specialist. Whilst a healthy well balanced lifestyle will not prevent depression, many treating doctors support the value of maintaining a healthy lifestyle to hasten the healing process. Other reactions to MS include anxiety and mood swings.

### **Staying active**

Staying active with sports and leisure activities also plays a part in healthy living and can help fill a gap if other activities such as working need to be adapted. Many leisure activities are available in the wider community and cater for many interests. Reading, gardening and cooking are recreational activities that keep you active, interested and promote your self esteem and wellbeing. Today there are adaptive technologies that can

make these activities enjoyable even for people who are severely debilitated by MS symptoms, such as page turners, garden and kitchen tools with special grips and a host of kitchen appliances.

### **Travel**

Travel is good for the soul. It can improve your outlook on life, broaden your horizons and get you away from daily routines, leaving you refreshed and renewed to face challenges. Trips away can give you space away from your ongoing issues with MS. Travelling without stress requires some planning and understanding of any limitations.

### **Pet therapy**

Enjoyment of life with a pet dates back many centuries and medical evidence is growing about the therapeutic value of having a pet or enjoying the company of a trained assistive pet in controlling stress, lowering blood pressure and adding years to your life.

### **Complementary and alternative therapies**

The use of complementary and alternative therapies (CAM) is common by people with MS. Often people feel that current approaches do not provide the whole answer to

a complex illness. So long as they do no harm, there are many CAM therapies worth looking at. They should be used in conjunction with conventional medicine and treatments. Some of the more common ones are: Acupuncture, Aromatherapy, Herbal medicine Homeopathy, Massage therapy, Pilates/Yoga and Meditation.

Finally, at some stage everyone will come across some miracle treatment, a cure or a wonder drug being offered for people with MS. It is important to understand what is being offered, do lots of research

and ask for advice before committing to such offers.

### **Medication**

A variety of medications are used in the management of MS. None of these medications claim to cure the disease, but they can reduce the rate of relapses. In the spirit of doing whatever it takes to stay well, many people with MS will choose to take one of the medications. There is no reason for this decision to be in conflict with lifestyle changes like diet and getting adequate sunlight.

### **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**

#### **MS Society of Australia**

<http://www.msaustralia.org.au/livingwithms.asp>

#### **Overcoming MS - Dr George Jelinek's website**

Overcoming MS (book) by Dr George Jelinek 2010

<http://www.overcomingmultiplesclerosis.org/book/>

<http://www.overcomingmultiplesclerosis.org/Recovery-Program/Program-Overview/>

#### **MS Active source**

Active wellness

[http://www.msactivesource.com/msasProject/msas.portal/\\_baseurl/threeColLayout/MSASRepository/en\\_US/msas/home/wellness/index.xml](http://www.msactivesource.com/msasProject/msas.portal/_baseurl/threeColLayout/MSASRepository/en_US/msas/home/wellness/index.xml)

#### **Multiple Sclerosis International Federation (MSIF)**

MS In Focus Issue 5 2005 Healthy Living

[http://www.msif.org/en/resources/msif\\_resources/msif\\_publications/ms\\_in\\_focus/issue\\_5\\_healthy\\_living/index.html](http://www.msif.org/en/resources/msif_resources/msif_publications/ms_in_focus/issue_5_healthy_living/index.html)

**MS Society of Canada**

10 tips for People Living with MS <http://mssociety.ca/en/pdf/tenTips.pdf>

**National MS Society of USA**

<http://www.nationalmssociety.org/living-with-multiple-sclerosis/healthy-living/index.aspx>

**Multiple Sclerosis Trust**

Tips for living with MS <http://www.mstrust.org.uk/downloads/tips2.pdf>

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