

Physical Activity: Move It or Lose It

We know the benefits of physical exercise: strength, stamina, and weight control.

Exercise may also have a protective effect against certain cancers and stroke, and reduces the risk of heart disease and diabetes.

But what does this all mean to a person who is constantly told to rest and not overdo it? What does this mean to a person with MS?

The first thing we need to do is change our perception of exercise. Exercise does not have to be harsh, sweaty workouts. In fact, the less pain the more gain, because you are more likely to stick with activities that feel good.

In MS, demanding activity can do more harm than good. Moderate exercise for 20 minutes or so every day yields the same benefits as intense sweat-and-grunt workouts.

Start by talking with your health care provider about the types of exercise most likely to be good for you. What is "good" exercise for one person may not be good for another. Like medication, exercise should be prescribed by a professional who knows how to develop individually designed exercises.

On the right track to fitness

Even a little exercise provides benefits. If you find you can't do what you used to do, don't give up. You can always modify or turn to another type of activity. Physical therapists and fitness instructors can provide expert help. With some changes, people with all types of MS can enjoy the benefits of exercise.

Some people prefer exercise that is free from the stress of competing with opponents or keeping up with others. They might choose an activity such as swimming or walking, which doesn't require a team or partner. People who have a competitive streak may find that adaptive sports or group workouts motivate them. Exercising alone at home may not supply the motivation that a class or a group provides but can be an ideal choice for some.

Different types of exercise include:

Aerobic exercise: what most people think of as "real" exercise. Bike riding, brisk walking, and running are all examples of aerobic exercise. Aerobic means that the body is taking in enough oxygen to meet its needs.

Balance exercises: muscles must use more energy to maintain an upright stance, and anything that increases balance will reduce weakness. Using such tools as an exercise ball can help improve balance.

Relaxation exercises: breathing and visualization techniques should be a part of any overall program to help reduce weakness and fatigue. Start your routine by talking with your health care provider about the types of exercise most likely to be good for you.