If your healthcare provider suggested an approach for managing your MS that could improve aerobic capacity, balance, depression, fatigue, muscular strength, quality of life, and walking mobility, would you choose it? Can exercise provide such benefits and be “good medicine” in MS? The answer seems to be, “Yes!”

The Many Benefits of Exercise

People with MS experience many benefits from engaging in an exercise program. For example, exercise programs can improve endurance, balance, muscle strength, and walking in people with MS. Exercise programs can alleviate symptoms of depression and fatigue. Engaging in exercise can improve overall evaluation of life satisfaction or quality of life in people with MS. There might even be benefits for cognitive function and brain health. We know of no other approach or medicine that can offer all these benefits in MS!

Aerobic Fitness or Endurance

Researchers use assessments of aerobic fitness (i.e., ability for sustaining physical effort or performance over time) for examining one’s endurance. Aerobic fitness is important for mobility, everyday activities, energy, happiness, and health-related quality of life in MS. Exercise training programs of two to three times per week for 30 to 60 minutes at a moderate intensity (60 percent of maximal physical effort) are effective for improving aerobic fitness in people with MS.

Balance and Falls Prevention

Balance assessments (i.e., maintenance of standing or upright posture) provide knowledge of a person’s capacity for maintaining control of one’s body and avoiding a fall. Physical balance is relevant to mobility, everyday activities, and safety amongst those with MS. As part of combined exercise training programs performed two to three times per week, balance exercises may be effective at improving one’s walking confidence and reducing fall frequency.

Muscular Strength

Strength assessments (i.e., the maximal amount of load one can lift in a single repetition of a given exercise) provide information on a person’s muscular strength. Muscular strength is important for mobility, balance, everyday activities, and fatigue in MS. Progressive exercise
training programs of two to three sessions per week starting at an intensity of around 10 to 15 repetitions (to reach the maximal load one can lift) may result in important gains in muscle strength leading to functional improvement.

**Mobility or Walking**

Researchers use assessments of mobility (i.e., the distance one can walk in a given time, or the time to walk a standardized distance) for examining walking performance in people with MS. Such measures provide information on walking endurance, speed, and agility. Mobility is important to almost all areas of one’s life and is important for maintaining independence. Exercise training programs that include aerobic exercise, strength training, and combined exercise may result in improved mobility or walking performance.

**Depression**

Assessments of mood (i.e., completion of questionnaires on topics related to depression and mood) are used by researchers to establish levels of depression and anxiety in people with MS. These moods may be important in many areas of life and can be linked with fatigue and quality of life among persons with MS. Research is beginning to indicate that exercise training may be a good approach for preventing or alleviating symptoms of depression amongst those with MS.

**Fatigue**

Researchers use self-report assessments of fatigue (i.e., completion of questionnaires on topics related to fatigue severity and its effect on one’s life) for examining fatigue in MS. Fatigue is common in MS and can affect almost all areas of one’s life. Evidence indicates that participating in an MS exercise program can reduce fatigue over time and may be one of the most important fatigue management strategies in MS. The evidence suggests that exercise might even reduce fatigue enough over time that it no longer interferes with daily tasks such as employment.

**Exercise Safety**

Those who have been diagnosed with MS may have been advised to rest and take life easy rather than engage in exercise. This was based on concerns that exercising may worsen symptoms and increase relapse rates in MS. There is actually very little evidence of problems or safety concerns regarding exercise participation in MS. There might even be fewer MS relapses in those who exercise compared with those who do not exercise.

**Begin to Exercise**

As with any new treatment, approach your healthcare provider and discuss starting exercise as part of your overall MS management strategy. You might even bring the recent physical activity guidelines for adults with MS. These guidelines are for adults with mild to moderate disability resulting from MS and provide evidence-based recommendations for both aerobic and strength exercises. The guidelines recommend 30 or more minutes of aerobic exercise (e.g., arm cycling, walking, leg cycling, elliptical training) twice a week and strength training exercises for major muscle groups (e.g., weight machines, free weights) twice a week. The exercises should progress in intensity or strenuousness over time, and there should be one day of rest between aerobic or resistance exercise training.

Exercise is important among those who have more advanced disability, although there is less research in this segment of persons with MS. Recent research is
investigating the use of body-weight-supported exercise and wheelchair-based activity (e.g., self-propulsion and strength training) for improving outcomes among those with more advanced MS.

There are exercise opportunities available for everyone with MS. We recommend that you take part in exercises that you enjoy. Beginning to exercise is the first step, and it is important to integrate exercise and physical activity into your long term MS management strategy, as you are more likely to continue exercising if you enjoy it. Exercise is good medicine and something that is self-empowering as an approach for MS management.

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**MSF Health and Wellness Program Combines Fun and Fitness**

The MSF Health and Wellness Program (HWP) provides resources to people with MS, family members, medical professionals, and health and wellness supporters nationally. These resources include educational materials, information, referrals, and the opportunity for those with MS to participate in a wide range of health and wellness programs.

The HWP consists of group and individual participation programs. Both programs offer activities such as adaptive yoga, aquatics, fitness, exercise, and therapeutic horseback riding, as well as recreational therapies such as art, music, horticultural, or adaptive sports. Currently, there have been greater demands for programs such as yoga and gym memberships.

These programs, which help manage specific symptoms associated with the disease, are offered to those with MS in a safe and supportive environment by qualified service providers. The programs also help maintain or improve physical abilities and emotional well-being, as well as increase social skills, confidence, and self-esteem.

There are a total of approximately 51 group and individual programs ongoing at 35 locations in 20 states. For more information, contact Alma Henry, MSF Health and Wellness Program Coordinator at (800) 225-6495.