

43 - MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS AND THE BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic, progressive disease that randomly attacks the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord).

Symptoms of MS are unpredictable and vary greatly from person to person and from time to time in the same person.

Common symptoms include:

Extreme Tiredness (Fatigue), Impaired Vision, Loss of Balance, Muscle Stiffness and Unco-ordination, and Sensory symptoms such as Tingling and Numbness.

There may also be Slurred Speech, and Cognitive changes such as Short-term Memory Loss and Mood Swings.

The majority of people with MS do not become severely disabled. Longitudinal studies have shown that 50% of people diagnosed with MS continue to be independently mobile after 15 years.

BENEFITS OF EXERCISE

Physical activity is important for everybody and should be performed regularly to improve fitness. Exercise has the same benefits for people with MS as it does for the general population;

- Maintenance of range of movement
- Stronger muscles
- Improved posture and movement control
- Improved cardiovascular fitness
- Improved feeling of wellbeing

GUIDELINES FOR EXERCISING FOR MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

1 Strengthening Activities

People with MS may have problems with fatigue; therefore low repetition exercises with frequent rest breaks are more beneficial. **QUALITY NOT QUANTITY!**

Typical muscle groups that benefit from strengthening are the abdominals, gluteals and quadriceps muscles. Particularly important for standing and walking in everyday life.

For safety—use of exercise equipment is preferred over the use of free weights that may cause injury when fatigue occurs.

2 General fitness/endurance

Improved endurance and aerobic ability may be difficult for many people with MS to achieve due to limited energy and fatigue, as well as impact of heat intolerance.

It is important to encourage individuals to pace themselves and take regular rest breaks.

Suitable activities include the use of exercise bikes, general exercise classes and water aerobics.

To minimise raised core body temperature, and the effects of heat intolerance normal swimming pools are preferable to hydrotherapy pools. Encourage clients to avoid overheating and take regular cold drinks.

3 Stretching and Flexibility

Increased muscle tone (stiffness) is common in MS and may restrict joint movement and stop other muscles working effectively for balance and function.

Typical muscle groups that require stretching are the calf muscles, hamstrings and hip flexors and adductors. When sitting for long periods these muscles are in a shortened position therefore prone to contracture (chronic shortened muscle length).

Yoga and Tai Chi are particularly beneficial activities due to the balance component.

If a client has significant balance problems a referral to a physiotherapist is indicated.

CONSIDERATIONS

- PEOPLE WITH MS BENEFIT FROM EXERCISE IN THE SAME MANNER AS THE GENERAL POPULATION
- EXERCISE DOES NOT CAUSE AN EXACERBATION OF MS OR ALTER THE COURSE OF THE DISEASE, SPECIFIC PROGRAMS WILL ASSIST MANAGEMENT OF MS
- EXERCISE MAY CAUSE A TEMPORARY INCREASE IN MS SYMPTOMS WHICH SHOULD RESOLVE AFTER THIRTY MINUTES REST
- PEOPLE WITH MS SHOULD NOT EXERCISE DURING AN ACUTE EXACERBATION

For more information on MS call MS Society of Victoria on

1800 287 367

For more information or referral to Exercise Groups call Physical Activity Infoline

1800 638 594