

Benefits of an Exercise Program for People with MS

A sedentary lifestyle, for anyone, leads to deconditioning. Inactivity can result in loss of muscle tone and disuse weakness (not related to demyelination), poor postural alignment and trunk control, decreased bone density (and resulting increased risk of fracture), and shallow, inefficient breathing. Exercise decreases the risk of heart disease, decreases resting blood pressure, aids sleep, strengthens bones, and increases flexibility; endurance, energy and can elevate one's sense of well being.

While exercise has not been shown to slow the progression of MS, it can help decrease complications that arise from muscular fatigue, weakness, contractures, and spasticity. Additionally, exercise can serve as an outlet for stress reduction and help maximize independence, regardless of one's ability.

In a pivotal study, researchers at the University of Utah demonstrated the benefits of exercise for people with MS. Those people with MS who participated in an aerobic exercise program had better cardiovascular fitness, better bladder and bowel function, less fatigue and depression, a more positive attitude, and increased participation in social activities.

Other benefits of exercise for people with MS include:

- Better **circulation**, bringing oxygen throughout the body
- Increased **flexibility** and joint range of motion can improve
- **Stronger** muscles and joints
- Improved ambulation **endurance**
- Improved skeletal structural **alignment**
- **Balance** issues can be addressed
- **Decreased** secondary complications of spasticity, muscular tension and muscle atrophy and risk of osteoporosis
- **Decreased** swelling/edema
- **Weight** maintenance/reduction is facilitated
- Increased **tolerance** for exercise
- Increased level of **independence**
- Enhance and support **cognitive** function
- Increased sense of **emotional well-being**

Subsequent studies have confirmed these exercise benefits using a variety of exercise regimens, including physical therapy, supervised exercise programs, treadmill training, aquatics, yoga, strength training, balance training, dance and movement, and group aerobic therapies.

MODULE 3: Benefits of an Exercise Program for People with MS

Numerous studies have shown that any benefits resulting from a short 1-3 month exercise program are lost within a few months after the program finishes. Thus, it is essential that exercise programs be sustained long-term. Students are encouraged to commit to ongoing, regular exercise over the life span. The first key is to get off to a good start by choosing a good exercise program. Professional advice from a doctor or rehabilitation therapist may help establish the right program. 'Bulking up' should NOT be the initial goal. Development of an ongoing, consistent fitness program with a gradual increase in difficulty is preferable.