

# August 2020 Newsletter



## Helpful Therapies for MSers of All Ages

A variety of medications are used to treat MS. There are a number of other treatments available to help manage the bothersome symptoms the disease may impose and increase quality of life no matter what age an individual with MS may be. Some are non-drug approaches that are part of standard medical care and others are less traditional.



As discussed in our [November 2019 newsletter](#), rehabilitation therapy is an essential component of MS care. Unlike some of the disease modifying medications, these non-drug therapies are potentially available to people with all kinds of MS. Rehabilitation therapy involves multiple specialties working together as needed. These specialties include physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, cognitive therapy and counseling. Rehabilitation specialists can provide education and strategies to address or prevent many complications of MS, such as decreased mobility and independence, fatigue, pain, bladder or bowel dysfunction, trouble swallowing, impaired communication, or problems with thinking and memory (to name a few).



Some types of exercise can be helpful in managing MS symptoms and are also important for general health and wellbeing. Exercise doesn't have to be rigorous to provide benefits. Any physical activity done on a regular basis (walking, gardening, or even cooking) has the potential to reduce stress and improve

physical and mental health. It's important for people with MS to check with their doctor before starting any exercise program. It needs to fit an individual's capabilities and limitations and may need to be adjusted as changes occur in MS symptoms. Many exercises can be done at home and modified if they cannot be done in the "traditional" way. Be aware that any exercise can elevate the body's core temperature and temporarily aggravate MS symptoms. Periods of exercise should be carefully timed to avoid the hotter periods of the day and prevent excessive fatigue. Some find that exercising in water is especially beneficial. Water helps people with MS move in ways that they may not be able to on land and keeps them cool while they are exercising.

### **Therapeutic exercises**

[Yoga](#) combines poses with proper breathing and thought processes to bring peace to the mind, body and spirit. Every pose can be simplified and practiced in a variety of positions for those who may be less able. Practicing yoga can help increase core strength and flexibility, while providing relaxing benefits that are helpful for releasing tension. One [study](#) also showed yoga helps improve fatigue and mood in people with MS.

[Tai Chi](#) is a martial art that combines slow, deliberate movements, meditation and breathing exercises. Tai Chi is said to be gentler than yoga. Many of the positions can be done while sitting. There is [evidence](#) that Tai Chi helps leg strength, walking, balance, coordination, flexibility, anxiety, depression and pain in people with MS. Another [study](#) suggests it may also help with fatigue, however the evidence is less clear.

[Pilates](#) is a low-impact exercise which focuses on building core stability and muscle strength by performing a range of exercises in smooth succession. The exercises are based on six fundamental principles: concentration, control, centering, flowing movement, precision and breathing. Pilates can be practiced on the floor with a mat or with a range of

equipment, such as weights, resistance bands or an exercise ball. There is evidence that doing pilates is beneficial for people with MS. One [study](#) concluded pilates and physiotherapy are equally effective at improving balance and mobility. Another [study](#) of 30 people with MS also showed pilates significantly improved their ability to walk. This form of exercise is also effective and feasible for people with MS who use wheelchairs. One [study](#) found pilates can improve sitting stability and posture, and decrease back and shoulder pain. Participants with MS in this study also described psychological and social benefits.

[Whole body vibration therapy](#) (WBVT) involves standing, sitting, or lying on a machine with a vibrating platform. As the machine vibrates, it transmits energy to the body, forcing muscles to contract and relax dozens of times each second, leaving a person feeling as if they had exercised. A [2013 study](#) looked at WBVT in combination with a standard rehabilitation program in people with MS. Results suggest that exercising using a vibrating platform may improve lower limb strength and mobility, especially in those with lower levels of disability. Other positive effects were seen on fatigue, mood, coordination and balance.

Many people with MS turn to [music therapy](#) for management of their MS symptoms. Doing repeated movements to a rhythmic beat can improve coordination and, in turn, also affect endurance and improve one's walking gait. [Research](#) also shows it can help with social skills, improve cognitive functions, decrease the severity of depression and anxiety, improve sleep and decrease pain in people with MS. Verbal communication may also benefit. Words that are hard to verbalize can sometimes be easily communicated when put to music.

Relaxation and stress management are important for managing MS symptoms. Everyone manages stress differently. In general, keeping a positive attitude and minimizing stress producers in life can help one feel better. Sharing thoughts and feelings with others can help relieve stress. Managing expectations is also important. MS is changeable and flexibility in expectations is the key to keeping stress levels low.



## **Helpful Relaxation Techniques**

Many people with MS get regular [massage therapy](#) to help them relax and reduce stress. [Researchers](#) at the University of Miami suggest message therapy significantly lowers anxiety and depression in people with MS and also significantly improves self-esteem, body image and an individual's image of disease progression. However, they did not draw any conclusions about physical symptoms. Another [study](#) suggests receiving massage therapy helps improve self-efficacy in people with MS (the belief that one can competently cope with a challenging situation). The [AMBER study](#) found abdominal massage to be more effective in treating bowel problems in people with MS when combined with standard bowel care than standard care alone.

[Aromatherapy](#) is the use of fragrances in the form of oils, known as essential oils, as they contain the essence of the plant from which they are taken. These oils can be used in the bath, as a steam inhalation, in an oil burner or with a compress. Aromatherapy is sometimes used with massage (a few drops of the required essential oils are added to massage oil). It can also be used as part of a sleep routine. Although there is no research evidence about the effects of aromatherapy on MS symptoms, it can promote relaxation and wellbeing.

[Meditation](#) is a mental exercise that involves relaxation, focus and awareness. There are many types of meditation. Some do it in a seated position with their eyes closed. Walking can be a form of meditation. Knitting, gardening, observing nature or any other activity that causes a person to narrow their focus can be meditative. [Studies](#) show that meditation can help improve quality of life, stress, anxiety, depression and various types of pain in people with MS. However, [research](#) also shows these benefits are not long lasting. Results suggest one must keep meditating in order to experience any benefit.

As discussed in our [April 2019 newsletter](#), [mindfulness](#) is a meditative technique that involves learning to focus attention on emotions, sensations and thoughts in an accepting and non-judgmental way. Mindfulness is a well-established therapy, with considerable research-based evidence for its benefit in people with MS. Various studies show that mindfulness helps to decrease [pain](#), [stress](#), [fatigue](#) and [depression](#) in people with MS. There is also evidence that it helps with sleep.

[Hypnotherapy](#) is a state of focus and concentration, typically achieved with the help of a clinical hypnotherapist, however it can also be self-induced. In this state, people are more susceptible to suggestion. The therapist then makes suggestions that are of therapeutic value to the individual with the hope that their thought and behavior patterns will be sufficiently modified on waking to effect positive change. Two studies ([one](#) and [two](#)) suggest self-hypnosis may provide pain relief in people with MS.

[Visualization](#) is based on the premise that the mind is the body's most powerful tool. A session can be led by a therapist, recorded or self-administered. Participants are helped to create positive mental images of desired outcomes or states and through visualization techniques persuade their body to translate these images into reality. A [small study](#) comparing visualization to a journaling exercise for people with MS found small improvements in fatigue, mood and quality of life. However, a large number of subjects dropped out of the study, leaving behind only the ones who enjoyed or benefited from the technique. [Researchers](#) in London, however, concluded visualization and relaxation can boost the immune system.



Although there's no special “MS diet,” what a person eats can make a difference in how they feel. As discussed in our August 2019 newsletter, different [diets](#) have been proposed as treatments, or even cures, for MS symptoms. While there are proponents for each, most have not been studied adequately, and the few that have been studied have produced mixed results. Several [dietary supplements](#) are said to be beneficial in managing MS symptoms. It’s important to note that supplements can cause side effects or harm when taken in combination, at high doses, or instead of prescribed medications. Because supplements are not regulated in this country, being educated and careful about their use is very important.

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) refers to medical products and practices that are not a part of standard medical care. These can be either in addition to treatments (complementary) or as alternatives to the orthodox approach. There is evidence that a number of these approaches may be helpful for people with MS.

It's important to note that people with MS should consult with their doctor before starting any new therapy. The treatments a physician prescribes are the ones that have been evaluated in controlled clinical trials or accepted by the MS medical community as safe and effective therapies. In contrast, most alternative treatments have undergone very little scientific study to evaluate their safety and effectiveness. When considering alternative treatments, it's important to find out what the treatment is, what's involved and how it works. It's also important to ask about side effects, risks, effectiveness and cost.



### **CAM Options for People with MS**

[Acupuncture](#) is an age-old healing practice of traditional Chinese medicine in which thin needles are placed at specific points on the body. It's primarily used to relieve pain but also has been used to treat other symptoms. The goal of acupuncture is to release the flow of the body's vital energy or "chi" by stimulating points along energy pathways. This is thought to release natural painkillers and may boost blood flow and change brain activity. Acupuncture needles are very thin, and most people feel no pain or very little pain when they are inserted. Some people report relief of symptoms like pain, muscle spasms, or bladder control problems, however the scientific evidence that it works for people with MS is mixed. A [recent study](#) found acupuncture improved walking difficulties in people with MS. However, a [2014 review](#) of 12 studies in MS concluded that although many of the studies included suggested that acupuncture was successful in improving MS symptoms, poor study designs made it difficult to draw any firm conclusions about its true effectiveness. Despite there not being enough evidence to make claims for or against the use of acupuncture in MS, it is generally considered safe when provided by an experienced, trained practitioner using sterile single-use needles. For those that don't like needles, [acupressure](#) may be an option. This involves pressing or massaging the acupuncture points to stimulate energy pathways.

[Reiki](#) is used by people with MS to help relieve various symptoms. This technique was developed in Japan in the 1920s. The word itself is Japanese for "universal life force energy." The whole body is treated rather than a specific symptom. The underlying principle of treatment is that "energy flows" through the body can be altered by placing

one's hands in a series of positions, on or over the body. Each position may be held for several minutes and the process can last up to an hour and a half. Although there is no research evidence supporting the use of reiki in MS, studies have shown it helps with a number of other related conditions. [Researchers](#) in Brazil found that reiki combined with massage reduced levels of stress by 33% and anxiety by 21%. In cancer, there is [evidence](#) that reiki is particularly effective at reducing pain and decreasing levels of anxiety and fatigue. It has also been found to improve wellbeing and mood during chemotherapy treatment.

[Reflexology](#) is a complementary therapy that involves having gentle pressure applied to the soles of the feet, hands or ears. It's thought that different points on these areas are connected to different organs and body systems. Reflexologists believe stimulating these points can encourage natural healing. As well as providing the calming effects of touch, reflexology can promote relaxation and improve wellbeing. One [study](#) found reflexology improved paraesthesia (abnormal sensations such as pins and needles), bladder symptoms, muscle strength and spasticity in people with MS. More recently, three separate studies ([one](#), [two](#) and [three](#)) concluded reflexology was an effective technique for relieving fatigue, pain and psychological symptoms (anxiety, stress and depression) in women with MS.

[Magnet therapy](#) is an alternative therapy that uses magnets or magnetic fields to treat illness, relieve pain and promote health. Thin metal magnets are attached to the body alone or in groups. These magnets may be worn for just a few minutes or for weeks at a time. The magnetic fields produced from the negative pole of the magnet are thought to have healing powers. [Pulse Electromagnetic Fields](#) (PEMF) is the most popular version of magnet therapy. Results from a [clinical trial](#) looking at 117 participants with MS suggest that PEMF can alleviate symptoms of MS. However, more research is needed to confirm these results.



As discussed in our [September 2018 newsletter](#), there is much controversy surrounding the therapeutic use of [marijuana](#) for MS. Some people with MS say that smoking or ingesting marijuana brings relief of many MS symptoms. However, scientists aren't clear on how it works and who should use it. Marijuana is a complex substance that may contain many different components affecting the body. Production of marijuana for medical use is

not standardized or regulated, therefore the effects of different batches of marijuana may not be the same. While many people are using marijuana, the FDA still hasn't approved it as a treatment because there haven't been enough studies to prove that it's safe and effective. This research is necessary to understand whether or not the benefits of marijuana use outweigh its many side effects. If you live in a state where medical marijuana is legal, it's important to consult with your doctor about the use of marijuana in your particular situation.

There is a wide range of treatment options available to people with MS to help relieve troublesome symptoms and improve quality of life. It may take a few attempts to determine which type of therapy works best. Some find it helpful to keep a journal tracking changes in treatment, symptoms, frequency of relapses and anything else that is



out of the ordinary. Sharing such information with one's healthcare providers can be very helpful in guiding treatment decisions. Talking to others who have used a given therapy may also help. With non-traditional therapies, it's especially important to research the provider's background. Find out about their credentials and how long they've been offering the treatment. People with MS should be sure that the provider is willing to work with their doctor and be fully informed about the total cost of the treatment (most are not covered by insurance). Be wary of outrageous claims and "secret" formulas (make sure all ingredients are listed). It's important for people with MS to weigh the pros and cons of any treatment under consideration and discuss this important decision with their doctor before proceeding.