**Rehabilitation Therapy – Better Living with MS**

The goal of MS rehabilitation therapy is to maintain or improve function in those who may be struggling with disability. It is an essential component of MS care. As is the case with MS disease-modifying therapies, rehabilitation doesn’t stop the progression of the disease, but it has many benefits and can greatly improve an individual’s quality of life. Rehabilitation offers non-drug approaches for treatment however it should be used alongside the MS medications. 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). Rehabilitation is especially important after a flare to recover as much of one’s ability as possible. Depending on symptoms, an individual may only occasionally need rehabilitation therapy or they may require it regularly. In either case, it’s important to consider it for MS as early as possible as this can make a big difference in its effectiveness.
Rehabilitation therapy for MS is multidisciplinary, which means it involves multiple specialties working together as needed. Physical therapy (PT) focuses on treating the muscles and tissues of the body to maximize function, mobility and safety. This usually involves doing targeted exercises to build strength in a specific area. Exercises may be aimed at improving one’s posture, balance and gait, conserving energy and reducing fatigue, stretching tight muscles, increasing manual dexterity or minimizing pain. It can also include pelvic floor exercises to address urinary/bladder issues. Some programs offer at-home exercises that people with MS can do on their own to maintain progress. As mentioned in our June 2019 newsletter, mobility aids may be useful tools to help people with MS be more ambulatory and active. PT might include choosing and fitting these devices, and training in their use. As heat is often a trigger that worsens MS symptoms, a physical therapist can provide advice on cooling products that may help in this regard. It’s important to keep in mind that individuals with MS should see a physical therapist that specializes in neurological conditions, rather than orthopedic conditions. They have expertise in treating people with movement disorders due to a disease of the nervous system, like MS.

Occupational therapy (OT) often complements PT. It is intended to help individuals complete “activities of daily living”, which are defined as six basic tasks: eating, bathing, dressing, toileting, walking/transferring, and continence. It can also include other things, such as leisure activities and work. While a PT works on building strength and flexibility, OT often works on finding easier ways of doing things by breaking down tasks into their components and helping people with whatever aspects are problematic. These professionals may employ a variety of techniques, ranging from muscle strengthening to energy conservation. An occupational therapist may visit a client’s home to ensure that it’s safe and accessible to accommodate their limitations (and recommend modifications if it’s not). If needed, they can offer advice and training on aids or devices that may be helpful in completing daily activities. An occupational therapist can also help individuals figure out when they have the most energy and focus, so they can plan their day in a way that makes them the most productive. Some also evaluate and treat problems with thinking and memory.
Just as people with MS may lose control over some of the muscles involved in walking, some lose control over muscles that control speech. Speech therapy, typically provided by a speech and language pathologist (SLP), can help to retrain these muscles, which will help make speech clearer. This training may also improve swallowing ability, since swallowing involves many of the same muscles used for speaking. A SLP can teach their clients exercises to help improve breath support. In addition, they can provide information and advice regarding devices that can help one interact, such as voice amplification devices, or computer-assisted communications devices. Their goal is to make communication easier and clearer, as well as promote safe swallowing and overall health. Like occupational therapists, some SLPs also evaluate and treat problems with thinking and memory.

As discussed in our June 2019 newsletter, up to 65% of people with MS have problems with aspects of thinking at some point in the course of their disease. This might include difficulty with memory, concentration, organization, problem solving or multitasking. Cognitive therapy offers strategies that may help with these issues. For example, it might include learning to use a smartphone to set reminders, or training to manage more than one task at a time. A number of professionals evaluate and treat these symptoms, including neuropsychologists, OTs and SLPs. While each of these specialties uses different evaluation and treatment strategies, they share the common goal of helping people with MS function better if cognitive changes are an issue.

Counseling plays an important role in rehabilitation therapy for people with MS, caregivers and family members, alike. There’s a huge emotional component to living with the disease. Feelings of loss, fear of change or uncertainty about the future are not uncommon. It’s important not to face these feelings alone. Individual counseling or participating in a local MS support group can offer effective coping strategies and fellowship. The National MS Society has a number of resources to help individuals with MS get the emotional and social support that they need to work through these difficult feelings.
People with MS frequently must overcome physical, mental and emotional challenges in order to accomplish daily tasks and achieve long term goals. Living the best life possible with the disease requires perseverance and a commitment to developing new ways of doing things. It’s important for people with MS to assemble a healthcare team that includes rehabilitation professionals, when necessary. MS is unpredictable and affects everyone differently. The rehab team can look for and identify problems, set goals, and come up with individualized solutions to maximize function and quality of life. It’s important to keep in mind that it may take time to see results from rehabilitation therapy and there may be frustrations along the way. However, many people with MS find it to be effective at reducing any loss of mobility or function they may be experiencing, and the long-term benefits are well worth it.