

January 2020 Newsletter



The Best Project You'll Ever Work On Is You

Making resolutions for the New Year is as traditional as making a champagne toast at midnight. The first of January each year millions of people make pacts and turn over new leaves as another year stretches ahead of them. Some pledge to lose weight or exercise more. Others want to quit smoking or make better financial decisions. While New Year's resolutions are popular, few people actually succeed at keeping them. According to [US News and World Report](#), eighty percent of those who set New Year's resolutions have fallen off the bandwagon and given up by the second week of February. Keeping resolutions can be especially challenging for people with MS. For many, looking ahead may be uncertain and scary. Motivation may collapse when symptoms flare. As difficult as it may be, it's important for those living with MS to be proactive about making healthy lifestyle choices, and to keep in mind some of the smallest positive changes in behavior can be the biggest sparks leading to significant benefit.



One of the most popular resolutions is to eat healthier. A [recent study](#) shows that diet can influence the course of inflammatory diseases in two ways. What you eat can change the

mix of “good” and “bad” bacteria in the digestive tract (the [gut microbiome](#)). A healthy digestive tract is populated by a great number of microorganisms living in balance. A disruption of this balance can have a significant impact on one’s health, specifically the chronic, systemic inflammation that occurs in diseases such as MS. In our [September 2017 newsletter](#), Dr. Farren Briggs covers the influence of the diet on the gut microbiome and how this plays a strong role in MS. [Research](#) also shows diet affects metabolic and inflammatory pathways. Inflammation is increased by high-calorie diets, which include foods that are low in fiber, and high in salt, sugar, fried food, red meat and animal fat. On the other hand, low-calorie diets that include vegetables, fruit, legumes, fish, and grains reduce inflammation and restore or maintain a healthy gut microbiome.



As we discussed in our [August 2019 newsletter](#), there is no specific diet that will prevent or cure MS. However there is [evidence](#) to support that eating certain foods and nutrients, and avoiding others, may help a person’s MS symptoms and disease activity. In our [December 2017 newsletter](#), Dr. Briggs highlighted a study looking at the relationship between diet and disease severity in people with MS. Results show individuals with MS eating a healthy diet have better outcomes (are less likely to have severe disability and have lower rates of depression). In our [January 2018 newsletter](#) Dr. Briggs focused on the possible benefits of probiotic supplementation and eating grapefruit. Other [studies](#) suggest vitamin D is a key diet-related factor in the possible prevention of MS. The most natural way to get vitamin D is through exposure to sunlight. Vitamin D is also naturally present in fatty fish and is added to milk, some cereal products, and a few [other foods](#). A [Swedish study](#) recently found that a high consumption of coffee is associated with a lower risk of developing MS. In addition, researchers have determined resveratrol (a compound in red wine) may exhibit anti-inflammatory effects in the brain and may also promote restoration of the myelin coating that surrounds nerve cells in [mouse models](#). Finally, another [study](#) showed that periodic cycles of a [fasting-mimicking diet](#) had beneficial effects in both mice and human participants with relapsing-remitting MS. Human subjects in this study reported improvements in their health and quality of life. It’s important to note, however, that more research is needed to determine the role of fasting in humans with MS.

According to a [recent survey](#), exercising more has been one of the top three resolutions for three years running. For people with MS, physical activity can be very beneficial to overall health and may even help ease MS symptoms. One of the [pioneering studies](#) on the benefits of exercise in



people with MS (done in 1996) found that 15 weeks of aerobic training helped to improve bowel and bladder function in people living with the disease. However, exercise doesn't have to be a rigorous cardiovascular workout to provide benefits. Physical activity in general is beneficial and can include a variety of things most people can do in the comfort of their home or community. A small [pilot study](#) by researchers at Rutgers University found that a specially designed yoga program also yielded better bladder control among people with MS. Fatigue is a common complaint among those living with MS, but a variety of types of exercise can help combat this. A [2014 review](#) found that yoga is as good as other forms of exercise at reducing fatigue in people with MS. Another [study](#) showed that eight weeks of water exercise helped to improve quality of life and decrease the perception of fatigue in women with MS. Many people with MS struggle with depression at some point. Exercise has been shown to improve mood in people who are depressed. A [2015 study](#) found that benefit also applies to adults with neurological disorders, including MS.

Exercise can help head off some complications that are commonly associated with MS. Many people with MS are at risk of developing osteoporosis, a bone-thinning disease that raises the risk of fracturing bones. Physical activity strengthens bones and protects against osteoporosis. In addition, exercise is extremely helpful with regards to weight management. If MS symptoms lead to reduced physical activity, one of the results can be putting on a few more pounds. Use of corticosteroids can also cause weight gain. This can make it even harder for an individual to get around. Exercise can help to slow or stop unwanted weight gain. It also holds benefit for those who are underweight by increasing appetite. It's important for those living with MS to work with their healthcare team to find the activities that suit them best and any assistive devices that may help keep them mobile.



While resolutions often center on developing new habits that will get us into better physical shape, getting into better mental and emotional shape can also provide huge rewards. Stress can have a significant detrimental effect on people with MS. It can worsen MS symptoms and [research](#) suggests that stress can also increase the likelihood of developing MS.

While it's impossible to go through life without some tension (and living with MS is inherently stressful), it's important to try and avoid triggers as much as possible and to develop good lifestyle habits that can help manage and reduce stress. This might include getting plenty of rest, taking the time to do something enjoyable or practicing relaxation techniques, such as meditation or yoga.

As discussed in our [March 2019 newsletter](#), making sleep a priority in the New Year is a universally good idea. [Studies](#) show more than half of people with MS have difficulty sleeping. This could be for a variety of reasons. Some may have to get up to use the bathroom frequently at night, while leg spasms or pain may awaken others. Some may be taking medications that cause insomnia. No matter what the cause, sleep deprivation can not only aggravate physical MS symptoms, such as balance and spasticity, but it can also worsen things like cognition and fatigue, which are harder to see, but equally disabling. People with MS are prone to a number of sleep disorders, such as [insomnia](#), [obstructive sleep apnea](#) and [restless legs syndrome](#). Awareness and treatment of these conditions is vital for improving the health and quality of life for individuals with MS. Fortunately, there are many options to help in this regard, including both behavioral and pharmaceutical remedies. It is very important for those living with MS to discuss any concerns about the amount or quality of sleep they are getting with their healthcare team and work with them toward the best solution.



According to writer Carl Bard, “though no one can go back and make a brand-new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand-new ending.” Healthy lifestyle choices can greatly improve an individual’s happiness and quality of life, whether they have MS or not. When MS enters the picture, the disease puts many obstacles in the way of a person’s resolve to keep resolutions like these. However, it’s very important to “muscle through” and work toward a “new you.” The upside may far outweigh the downside.