Healthy Eating

The benefits of a well-balanced diet

Many people find they can improve their quality of life and sense of well-being by focusing on aspects of health that can be controlled and changed – such as eating a nutritionally balanced diet. This, combined with appropriate exercise, can help: control weight, decrease fatigue, maintain regular bowel and bladder function, minimize the risk of skin problems, keep bones healthy and strong, maintain healthy teeth and gums and strengthen the heart.

A healthy diet, as recommended by Canada's Food Guide contains a balance of the major food groups:

Food Group	Function
Proteins	Growth and tissue repair
Carbohydrates	Provide energy
Fats	Absorbs certain vitamins and for essential fatty acids
Fibre	Healthy digestion
Vitamins and minerals	Tissue repair, bone strength and the absorption of other nutrients
Fluids	For optimum working of the body: water carries nutrients around the body and is used in various chemical processes carried out in our cells

Vegetarian and vegan diets

Vegetarian and vegan diets may need more careful planning to ensure they cover all essential nutrients. A dietitian can help you find alternatives.

Food allergy and intolerance

Research does not support the use of gluten-free or other diets excluding specific foods to treat MS. However, just like anyone else, people with MS can react to particular foods. If you think you may have an intolerance or allergy, your doctor or dietitian can help you look into it further.

Managing your weight

Both weight loss and weight gain can be a problem for people with MS. A dietitian can help you develop a plan that adjusts as your needs change, ensuring you always get a healthy balance of nutrients. Weight problems may not be directly linked to your MS.

Your doctor or other healthcare professional can investigate the problem to find the cause.

Research into Diet and MS

No diet has been proven to impact the course of MS. A diet low in saturated fats (meat, eggs, and dairy products) and high in monounsaturated fats (canola oil, olives and olive oil, nuts, seeds, avocados) and polyunsaturated fats (flaxseed oil, fish and fish oil) may be helpful. Eating plenty of fruits, grains and vegetables helps to keep your heart healthy, avoid constipation, and maintain a healthy weight. Currently, research does not show that diet causes MS. Neither have any special diets been proven to prevent MS or affect the way it may develop.

Paleolithic Diet

The diet recommends ingesting greens, sulfur-containing vegetables and fresh meats and the elimination of gluten, processed foods, dairy and eggs from the diet. In 2014, a small uncontrolled pilot study examined the effects of a Paleo diet in combination with strengthening exercises, as well as meditation and massage. Results found a significant improvement in reported fatigue in individuals who adhered to the program. While it is encouraging, the study was limited by the small sample size and lack of a control group. Overall, the scientific evidence available is unable to conclusively determine the impact of a Paleo diet in MS.

Swank Diet

Developed by Dr. Roy Swank in the 1940's, this diet centres on limiting the intake of fats, especially saturated fat, to 15g or less per day. The diet also recommends taking cod liver oil supplementation, a major source of omega-3 fatty acids. Studies examining the Swank diet have discovered benefits in MS progression in those who adhered to the diet. However, researchers find fault with these studies, citing methodological concerns including the lack of a control group for comparison.

Overcoming MS Diet

Similar to the Swank diet, the Overcoming MS Diet - developed by George Jelinek in 1999 - advocates avoiding saturated fat intake along with eliminating dairy and meat. Supplementation with omega-3 and vitamin D is recommended along with meditation and exercise.

Best Bet Diet

This diet was developed by Ashton Embry and focuses on excluding dairy, grains and legumes from the diet. The premise for the Best Bet Diet diet is that protein from foods which are not fully digested can gain access to the blood stream and activate the immune system. Although some anecdotal evidence supports an improvement of symptoms in those adhering to the Best Bet Diet, no published results have supported the efficacy of this model.

Currently there is a lack of sufficient evidence conferring the efficacy of any of these and other specialized MS diets.

Vitamins and Minerals

Vitamins and minerals have a number of vital functions and have complex relationships with each other. Some are needed so that the body can use other nutrients effectively – for example zinc and vitamin B6 are both needed in the diet if you are to benefit from omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids. Others, such as vitamins A, C and E, can work as 'antioxidants'.

Research has not found that high-doses of any vitamins or minerals are of any benefit either. A healthy, balanced diet will usually provide you with appropriate levels of nutrients. Excess vitamins and minerals can be harmful. People with MS should avoid food supplements that claim to boost the immune system. That could be a problem in MS, which results because of a misdirected immune attack on myelin within the central nervous system.

Vitamin D

We obtain vitamin D through our diet and exposure to sunlight. Some people have suggested that low levels of exposure to the sun could increase the chances of developing MS. This is because MS is more common in areas further from the equator – where there is less intense sunshine.

Many physicians now suggest that people with MS might benefit from taking a daily intake of 2,000-4,000 IU of vitamin D because some people may be vitamin D deficient. If you change your diet radically or increase your intake of vitamins, it is a good idea to consult your doctor or a nutrition specialist. Researchers are determining the relationship between inadequate vitamin D and risk of MS, as well as the effect of vitamin D intake in treating MS. Please see the MS Society of Canada's website for more information about vitamin D guidelines.

Vitamin B12

The exact relationship between MS, MS treatments and vitamin B12 is complex and not yet fully understood. Vitamin B12 is needed for the body to make myelin – the protective layer around nerve fibres that gets damaged in MS. Because of the importance of vitamin B12 in the nervous system, and because a deficiency can lead to symptoms similar to those found in MS, some people have suggested it can help treat or prevent MS. However, research does not support these theories. Most people with MS have normal vitamin B12 levels but deficiencies can arise.

Essential Fatty Acids (omega-3 and omega-6 essential fatty acids)

There are three main forms of lipids in our diet: saturated, monounsaturated and polyunsaturated. Lipids are a source of energy that store certain vitamins. They have received particular attention in MS research because they also have a role in the central nervous system. Some think that omega 6 linoleic acid may benefit some people with MS. Health professionals do not all agree that this is the case, but there is no doubt that linoleic acid is a valuable part of a healthy diet. The recommended amount can usually be obtained through a balanced diet, without the need for supplements. The ways in which essential fatty acids affect the central nervous system are complex and not yet fully understood but part of the story may be their immunosuppressive and anti-inflammatory effects.

Antioxidants

Oxidants, or free radicals, are chemicals that react easily with other substances in the body, changing or damaging their structure. For example, essential fatty acids are vulnerable to attacks from oxidants. Certain vitamins can limit the damage oxidants cause and protect the essential fatty acids. These vitamins are known as antioxidants. Some research has suggested that oxidant activity in the central nervous system may be linked to the damage that occurs in MS. However, there have been few studies into the use of antioxidants for people with MS and the significance of oxidants is still unclear. Antioxidant therapy might also carry a risk for people with MS, as some antioxidants have a stimulating effect on the immune system, which in theory could worsen the effects of MS. Further research is needed to determine the safety and potential benefits of antioxidant therapy for MS.

Additional Information:

For additional information related to any of the topics listed in this resource, please contact the MS Knowledge Network at 1-844-859-6789 or by email at msnavigators@mssociety.ca