



## Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

*For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.*

*These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.*

# MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

## General Information

### Facts and Figures

- 2008 statistics show that between 2 and 2.5 million people are living with MS;
- Canadians are among those most affected by MS in the world. It is the neurological disease most prevalent among young Canadian adults;
- Women are over three times as likely to contract MS than men;
- People are usually diagnosed with MS between the ages of 15 and 40, although children as young as 2 can be affected;
- MS can impact hearing, vision, speech, memory, mobility and balance. It can trigger fatigue, paralysis and double vision.

### What is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is an inflammatory condition in which nerve cell covers become damaged. This damage inhibits the communication of information throughout the nervous system, which in turn can predispose an individual to a range of physical, mental and psychiatric problems. Symptoms which an individual may experience can include tremors/shaking in the limbs (arms or legs), fatigue and associated pain. Although a variety of experimental treatments have been developed, there is to date no known cure.

There are several different types of MS. Symptoms can be isolated or they can occur frequently, leading to progressive deterioration. Symptoms may disappear completely between attacks but permanent neurological damage can often take place, particularly as the disease progresses.

Physical activity is extremely important for a person who has MS. A sedentary lifestyle not only negatively impacts a person's physical condition and motor skills, but it threatens their emotional condition and their social relationships. A recent study examined the connection between the worsening of MS symptoms and self-reported physical activity. There was an overwhelming correlation between low or no participation in physical activity and a worsening of MS symptoms. The message, therefore, is that participation in physical activity can help to alleviate the severity of MS symptoms.

### **Impact of Multiple Sclerosis**

Physical activity can go a long way towards slowing the decline which a person may experience through Multiple Sclerosis, and to providing the person with the tools to manage their condition. Regardless of their physical ability or degree of health, individuals with MS can benefit a great deal from regular physical activity. Even if an individual has difficulty with standing or walking, they can benefit through exercise. These individuals have more to lose from being sedentary.

Some of the common factors that are associated with Multiple Sclerosis, and which regular exercise can help to alleviate, include:

- Impaired neuromuscular functions;
- Infection of the upper respiratory tract;
- Peripheral circulation disorder;
- Pressure ulcers;
- Bowel and bladder problems;
- Osteoporosis;
- Contractures (stiffness or restriction in joints, muscles, skin, tendons or ligaments).

### **Working with a Person who has Multiple Sclerosis**

#### **Tips for getting active**

Multiple Sclerosis symptoms can vary in every individual. An individual may require an assistive device for support or be ambulatory (standing). The choice of physical activity should be matched with the individual's needs and their abilities. Each person will move and participate in their own way. The types of equipment which may assist a person with MS to participate in physical activity may include a manual, sport or power wheelchair, a cane, crutches, walker, brace, or orthotics.

Each and every individual should have the opportunity to get actively involved in community programs, fitness and health initiatives. The role of physical activity providers in creating a welcoming and safe environment to accommodate a person with MS can not be understated.

When working with an individual who has MS, consider the following:

- Create a welcoming environment – customer service focus;
- Ask the individual what their needs and interests are – never assume;
- Reminder: privacy/disclosure policies ensure individuals share information at their discretion and comfort;
- Ask the individual to consult a medical practitioner prior to involvement;
- Focus on what the individual can do rather than what they cannot;
- Think safety first;
- Be patient and supportive;
- Consult with resource agencies with expertise in areas of inclusive physical activity – training or professional development materials may be beneficial;
- Ensure staff and volunteers receive adequate training to be able to deliver quality customer service, gain equipment knowledge/use and learn about available resources – on/off-site.

### **Teaching and Communication Technique**

- Offer assistance and support as required or when asked;
- Reminder – do not touch an individual or their assistive device or service animal without their consent;
- Create space for easy movement and participation;
- Match the individual with activities which meet their needs and abilities. Some individuals may be able to swim a mile or engage in a vigorous aerobics class, while for others, a slow walk may be enough;
- Make it fun – having fun and socializing are important benefits to physical activity experienced by people who are active;
- Develop activities which meet the Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines for adults with mild to moderate MS, which prescribe 30 minutes of moderate intensity aerobic activity twice per week, and strength training for major muscle groups two times weekly;
- When leading activities outdoors, ensure participants wear sun screen, protective clothing, sunglasses and a hat;
- Make it interesting – exercise and every day activities, such as gardening or walking a dog, can easily go together.

### **Physical Activity Tips and Modifications**

- Ask the individual to consult a medical practitioner prior to involvement;
- Provide a facility without barriers to participation, thus creating access to the venue, equipment or activity (this could include: accessible parking spaces, ramp access or flat access to the front door, remove obstacles in hallways – signage, garbage/recycling bins, automatic or wide frame doorways to enter/exit);
- Allocate additional staff or volunteers to the area where the participant will be taking part in an activity, where possible;
- Post equipment safety and usage information with large print written text and diagrams;
- Ask first, do not assume that the individual needs or would like help;

- Avoid slippery surfaces and raised obstructions;
- If available, provide adapted equipment;
- As with every individual, other considerations should be discussed (i.e. pain, fatigue and the individual's expectations).

## **Resources**

Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability – [www.ala.ca](http://www.ala.ca)

Variety Village – [www.varietyvillage.ca](http://www.varietyvillage.ca)

Wikipedia: Multiple Sclerosis, overview -  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiple\\_sclerosis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multiple_sclerosis)

MS Society of Canada: About Multiple Sclerosis - <https://mssociety.ca/about-ms>

Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology - Guidelines for Special Populations:  
Physical Activity Guidelines for Adults with Multiple Sclerosis -  
<http://www.csep.ca>

Healthline: Contracture Deformity: Symptoms, Causes and Prevention -  
[www.healthline.com/health/contracture-deformity](http://www.healthline.com/health/contracture-deformity)

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**Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability**

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