

Regular exercise benefits MS sufferers

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is one of the most common neurological disorders and causes of disability in young adults. It is also one of the most unpredictable as progression varies widely among individuals.

With May designated International Multiple Sclerosis Awareness Month, the Biokinetics Association of South Africa (BASA) believes it is important for there to be greater understanding of the way management of the disease is changing.



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Multiple Sclerosis South Africa estimates that there are about 5,000 MS sufferers in the country and around 2.5m around the world, with women outnumbering men by two to one. MS symptoms can start anywhere between 10 and 80 years of age, but onset is usually between the ages of 20 and 40.

Symptoms vary

According to Areta Potgieter, an executive member of BASA, symptoms can include extreme fatigue, lack of coordination, weakness, tingling, impaired sensation, vision problems, bladder problems, cognitive impairment and psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, tension and anger.

For some people, MS involves periods of relapse and remission. For others, it can get steadily worse with time. Some people may feel and seem healthy for many years following diagnosis, while others may be severely debilitated very quickly.

Exercise can help

“One of the most profound changes in MS treatment and management is related to exercise. For decades, people with MS were advised to avoid excessive physical activity and exercise because of concerns about worsening the disease’s activity.”

“However, recent studies indicate that not only do people with MS tolerate physical exercise, it is also helpful in managing symptoms, preventing complications and may even have a beneficial impact on the progression of the disease and its symptoms – both physical and mental,” Potgieter says.

For example, fatigue is one of the most common and devastating symptoms of MS, affecting between 75-90% of all MS patients. But avoiding physical activity could actually enhance fatigue – leading to a vicious circle of exercise avoidance and increased fatigue, which in turn further limits their physical activity and social life.

Training needs to be tailored

“Numerous studies have shown that certain types and intensity of exercise, including walking and other aerobic activities and, to a lesser extent, resistance and strength training, may provide relief and could play a significant part in fatigue management while also improving endurance, muscle tone and posture stability,” she adds.

“It is important, however, that a physical training programme is tailored to the individual needs and symptoms of each MS patient. It should take account of the progression of the disease, as well as the individual's degree of disability, age, and concomitant diseases. Importantly, it also has to ensure that the patient is not overstrained.”

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