

Physical activity for people with multiple sclerosis (MS) Guidance for instructors, sports coaches and volunteers

There are over 11,000 people in Scotland living with multiple sclerosis (MS). MS is a neurological condition that affects the central nervous system and spinal cord. It's caused when the immune system isn't working properly. **MS is different for everyone.** You can get symptoms in many parts of your body, it may affect mobility, flexibility, thinking, coordination. Most people are diagnosed between the ages of 20 and their late 60s.

Typical symptoms include:

- fatigue
- issues with balance and walking
- muscle spasms and stiffness
- bladder and bowel problems
- low mood, anxiety and depression

There are lots of options for treating and managing your MS. These include drug treatments, exercise, physiotherapy, diet and alternative therapies.

Research tells us exercise can improve people's mood, mobility and muscle strength, as well as some MS symptoms.

We know staying active can:

- help manage MS symptoms, including fatigue, balance and walking
- improve mood
- improve overall health when MS is mild
- help someone stay as mobile and active as possible when MS is more severe
- decrease the risk of other diseases such as heart disease and diabetes

If someone is training or being active with MS, they could experience many different symptoms from day to day or even within the same day or same workout.

Every day can provide a different challenge, and as a trainer, sports coach or instructor you need to be ready to put your skills to the test and constantly assess, by watching and listening to the person, and modifying any workout when they show or communicate anything untoward. People with MS tend to know their own symptoms and a change in symptoms might not happen during the workout but later. So it's important to ask how people were after their last session.

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There's no single activity that could be called an 'MS exercise'. MS affects people in different ways, so what works for one person might not work for someone else.

Dealing with symptoms

Start off slow. People with MS tend to become fatigued very easily, so start slowly. As with any unconditioned person, the intensity of the workout has to fit the fitness level of the individual. The trainer needs to have patience and exercise a balance of trying not to push for too much too soon, while providing a level of intensity that will push the client toward a higher level of fitness.

Be creative. One of the symptoms often experienced by people with MS is neuropathy, or numbness in their hands. This sometimes presents itself as a feeling of 'pins and needles' and makes gripping weights difficult. On these days you may need to get creative and possibly use lifting straps to help with the grip or avoid free weights altogether and focus on machines. Another problem that can occur with this symptom is that it sometimes becomes difficult for the person to feel exactly how heavy the weight really is. As a trainer, if you are not paying close attention, this is where someone can really get hurt. Another symptom can be bladder and bowel issues. Some practical suggestions would be to ensure people know where the nearest toilets are and to ensure people have time to go to the toilet during the session if necessary, possibly build in 'rest' breaks.

Keeping cool. It is also very important for people with MS to stay cool during their workout sessions. Heat is not a friend of MS and overheating can and does worsen symptoms. Some practical things that can be done

- encourage people to wear light, loose fitting clothes which can be 'added' too if required i.e. layers
- break up exercise sessions into smaller sections, with regular breaks
- suggest drinking ice drinks, wearing a 'cooling vest' and taking a cool bath before exercise, to help to exercise for longer
- keep the exercise space well ventilated. A fan might help avoid overly hot swimming pools; ideally temperature is below 29°C. Alternatively suggest a different type of exercise.

For further information you may want to read our factsheet on Hot and cold – the effects of temperature on MS available here <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/ms-resources/hot-and-cold-effects-of-temperature-on-ms-factsheet>

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Don't give up

People that have just recently been diagnosed with MS are sometimes frustrated by what is happening in their body. They have not had time yet to get used to dealing on a daily basis with the fact that their brain tells them they can do things that their body is struggling to perform. Above all, it is the trainer's job to be patient. This might mean going a little slower than you would with your other clients or even helping people from machine to machine or exercise to exercise. These are just a few of the more common symptoms that may occur when working with someone who has MS.

For further information or guidance please visit <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/> or contact the MS Society MS Helpline on Freephone 0808 800 8000 or helpline@mssociety.org.uk. The Helpline is open 9am – 7pm, except bank holidays.