



## **Diet: I Have MS – What Should I Eat?**

**By Roz Kalb, PhD**

You or a family member have been diagnosed with MS, and you're wondering what kinds of foods would be healthy and beneficial. It's a great question, but the answer may or may not satisfy you. There is no special diet for MS that has been shown in clinical studies to alter the course of MS, rate of relapses (also called exacerbations or attacks), or disease activity on MRI scans. How you eat, however, does play a role in your overall health and wellness. Research has shown, for example, that

- A high Body Mass Index (BMI) can increase a person's risk of relapse.
- High cholesterol is associated with worsening disability scores.
- Vascular health conditions, including elevated cholesterol and blood pressure, and diabetes are common in people with MS – and these conditions can hasten disability progression and shorten the lifespan in a person with MS.

The good news is that vascular conditions can be managed or prevented with a healthy diet and adequate amounts of physical activity and exercise.

### **What is a Healthy Diet for a Person with MS?**

The diet that's healthy for a person with MS is the same diet that's good for all of us. Depending on your personal goals, you may want to pay attention to your BMI and cholesterol level, as well as your caloric intake, while eating:

- A low-fat, plant-based diet
- An abundance of colorful fruits and vegetable
- Limited sugar and salt
- Limited processed foods
- Adequate fiber (25 grams for women; 38 grams for men)
- Foods that contain omega-3 and 6 fatty acids, including fatty fish, flaxseeds, canola oil, and walnuts
- Moderate amounts of caffeine and alcohol
- Foods that provide vitamin D (while having your levels checked periodically to determine whether you need supplementation)

This graphic from ChooseMyPlate.gov offers suggestions for creating a balanced meal (1/2 fruits and veggies, 1/4 grains, 1/4 lean protein, along with low- or non-fat dairy)

**Make half your plate fruits and vegetables**

- » Choose fresh, frozen, canned, or dried fruits and vegetables.
- » Eat red, orange, and dark-green vegetables, such as tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and broccoli, in main and side dishes.
- » Use fruit as snacks, salads, or desserts.
- » Keep raw, cut-up vegetables handy for quick snacks.
- » Choose whole or cut-up fruits more often than fruit juice.

**Switch to skim or 1% milk**

- » They have the same amount of calcium and other essential nutrients as whole milk, but less fat and calories.

**Make at least half your grains whole**

- » Choose 100% whole-grain cereals, breads, crackers, rice, and pasta.
- » Check the ingredients list on food packages to find whole-grain foods.

**Vary your protein food choices**

- » Choose a variety of foods including seafood, beans and peas, nuts, lean meats, poultry, and eggs.
- » Keep meat and poultry portions small and lean.
- » Try grilling, broiling, poaching, or roasting. These methods do not add extra fat.

**Cut back on foods high in solid fats, added sugars, and salt**

- Choose foods and drinks with little or no added sugars.
- Look out for salt (sodium) in foods you buy.
- Eat fewer foods that are high in solid fats.

**Eat the right amount of calories for you**

- Enjoy your food, but eat less.
- Cook more often at home, where you are in control of what's in your food.
- When eating out, choose lower calorie menu options.

Get your personal daily calorie limit at [www.ChooseMyPlate.gov](http://www.ChooseMyPlate.gov) and keep that number in mind when deciding what to eat.

**Be physically active your way**

Pick activities that you like and start by doing what you can, at least 10 minutes at a time. Every bit adds up, and the health benefits increase as you spend more time being active.

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## Limited Research is Emerging about MS-Specific Diets

- In a study published in 2001 comparing the modified Wahls Paleolithic elimination diet and the Swank low-saturated fat diet in people with relapsing-remitting MS, both diets were shown to reduce fatigue and improve quality of life.
- A clinical trial is currently underway comparing a Ketogenic (restricted carbohydrate) diet, a fasting diet, and a fat-modified standard diet to determine whether a Ketogenic or fasting diet has an impact on inflammation, disease severity, and remyelination.

As researchers develop new and better way to study dietary interventions, we look forward to more helpful information.

## I Know What I Should Eat – But So Many Things Seem to Get in the Way

Eating a healthy, balanced diet can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Common barriers include:

- **Finances** – food prices have increased significantly over the past several months, and fresh fruits and vegetables, fish and lean meats, can be very pricey.
- **MS symptoms** – fatigue, heat sensitivity, mobility challenges, vision problems, among other symptoms can make meal prep a real challenge.
- **Social and cultural pressures** –
  - Every culture has its beloved recipes, many of which may not be the best for your health or your waistline.
  - Socializing is good for all of us, but dining with others often involves more food and more treats, making portion control more difficult
- **Emotions** – eating when we're feeling sad, needy, lonely, empty, or even happy, can add up to a lot of food, so recognizing our food triggers is important

Members of your healthcare team, including nutrition experts, occupational therapists, and mental health professionals, can help find ways to overcome these challenges. Can Do MS has archived webinars and articles to support your efforts.

### **I Set Goals for Myself but I Never Seem to Reach Them**

Setting goals sounds easy but achieving them often is not. Too often, we set goals for ourselves that aren't SMART – meaning that they aren't specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, or timely enough. Setting dietary goals is no exception. Too often, we say "I want to eat healthier meals...I want to lose weight... or I'm going to give up sweets...." And then we get discouraged when we don't meet these goals.

A nutrition specialist can help you create personalized SMART goals that meet your needs. Examples might include:

- I plan to add 3 servings of fresh vegetables and 3 servings of fresh fruit to my diet for the next 4 weeks.
- My goal is to substitute fresh fruit for dessert 3 nights per week for 1 months
- I will speak with an occupational therapist to learn 3 strategies for simplifying food prep and implement those strategies each dinnertime for the next month
- For the next month, when I crave a candy bar I will eat a piece of fruit instead.

Each of these goals is very specific, measurable and time limited, which makes it easier to track your progress. You can choose specific goals of your own to ensure they are relevant to your personal needs. At the end of the specified time period, you can extend your goal if you've been successful or tweak your goal if it needs some adjustment. Be sure to put together a group of cheerleaders to support your efforts.