



NUTRITION FOR
PEOPLE LIVING WITH

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS



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WHAT IS MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a disease of the brain and spinal cord, also called the central nervous system. In MS, the immune system attacks the protective layer of your nerves called the myelin sheath. Sclerosis means scarring, as this damage to the nerves leaves scars. The word multiple tells us that the scars are in many places along the nerves. This scarring causes both chronic inflammation and communication problems between your brain and body.


Each case of MS is different. Its symptoms and severity can vary from person to person. Flare-ups of MS (also called MS attacks) may cause symptoms such as numbness, tingling, mood changes, memory problems, or fatigue. Over time, damage caused to nerves may result in vision issues or paralysis. However, some people may be symptom free most of their lives and only have flare-ups every few months or years.

We do not know what causes MS, but we do know that physical therapy, medications, and good nutrition can help manage symptoms. There is no food or diet that can cure MS. However, a healthy diet is the best way to reduce inflammation and support the health of your central nervous system. This guide will provide an overview of the general nutrition recommendations for those with MS.

Please note that nutrition needs for MS vary from person to person. Multiple Sclerosis is a complex disease and can require many conversations with your healthcare team. Talk to your Registered Dietitian or other healthcare provider to learn what foods and treatments are best for you.


NUTRITION FOR MS

MALNUTRITION

A yellow circular icon containing a white silhouette of a fork and a spoon, representing nutrition or diet.

Some symptoms of MS may decrease your independence and your ability to shop, cook, or feed yourself. Stress, depression, and some medications may also decrease some people's appetites. Eating less and moving less can lead to muscle loss and malnutrition. Malnutrition is when your body does not get enough energy or nutrients to keep working. A diet that provides enough calories from a variety of food is important for keeping the body strong and preventing other illnesses.

WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

A blue circular icon containing a white silhouette of a kitchen scale, representing weight management.

Although malnutrition and unwanted weight loss can happen with MS, excess weight can also make MS worse. Extra weight can worsen fatigue and soreness, put extra stress on the heart and lungs, and increase your risk for other diseases. Steroid therapy, depression, and less activity can all lead to weight gain in those living with MS. A Registered Dietitian can help create a healthy eating plan and help you reach a weight that is right for you.



GENERAL NUTRITION RECOMMENDATIONS

SODIUM

High sodium intake may cause MS flare-ups or make symptoms worse. It is recommended to only eat about 2,300 mg of sodium per day. Many adults consume a lot of sodium, mostly from processed foods and eating out. Choose foods with less than 140 mg sodium per serving. These are often labeled “salt-free,” “sodium-free,” or “low sodium.” At home, try adding flavors to your food without salt. Examples could include lemon juice, vinegar, herbs, or a sodium-free seasoning like Mrs. Dash. When you see foods labeled “reduced sodium,” “lightly salted,” “unsalted,” or “no salt added,” check the nutrition label to make sure they are low in salt.

HEALTHY FATS

Unsaturated fats are the healthy fats that our body uses to fight inflammation and keep our heart and brain healthy. Choose foods such as avocado, fish, nuts, flaxseed, sunflower oil, corn oil, and olive oil. You may also talk to your doctor about taking a fish oil supplement for added Omega-3. Limit fried foods, fatty cuts of meat, pastries, coconut oil, and butter, as these are high in less healthy saturated fat.



PROTEIN

Protein helps keep muscles strong and is extra important in those with malnutrition or weight loss. Protein is also great for those doing exercise or physical therapy, as it helps muscles recover and grow. Eat high-quality proteins like whole cuts of meat, poultry, fish, and eggs. Plant-based protein such as beans, lentils, and soy can also be great options. Limit your intake of processed meats like hot dogs and lunch meat, as these have more sodium and saturated fat.

DECREASE INFLAMMATION

A healthy diet can decrease inflammation and help support a healthy nervous system in those with MS. Focus on eating lean proteins, whole fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low-fat dairy, oils, and fiber. Choose water as your main hydration source and try to limit soda and alcohol.

BONE HEALTH

To keep healthy and strong bones as we age, it is recommended to eat foods with Calcium (milk, yogurt, calcium-fortified orange juice, sardines with bones). If you don't eat these foods daily, you may need to supplement with calcium. Vitamin D is needed for our bones to be able to absorb calcium and most people need to supplement Vitamin D, especially in the winter months. Talk to your doctor for specific recommendations on Calcium and Vitamin D supplementation.

SWALLOWING

Some people with MS may have trouble with speech or swallowing. This can increase anxiety and risk of choking. If this occurs, talk to your doctor about visiting with a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP) who can give you swallowing exercises and recommend safe foods for you.

HEALTHY HABITS



FATIGUE, APPETITE & ACTIVITY

Everyone can become tired, but more intense MS flare-ups of fatigue can decrease appetite and activity. Medication and therapy can help, but it is important to have a plan in place for meals and snacks on high fatigue days. Your fatigue day plan should include nutritious and easy foods and should not rely on sugar and caffeine to keep you going. Freezing leftovers, using a Crock-Pot, or heating up healthy freezer meals are all great options.



SLEEP

Adults need about 7-9 hours of sleep each night. Restful sleep can support a healthy brain, heart, and immune system. It can also reduce stress, regulate mood, and help with healing. Poor quality sleep can make fatigue and other MS symptoms feel worse. Practice good sleep hygiene, such as going to bed and waking at similar times each day, turning off screens an hour before bed, and avoiding caffeine or naps later in the day. Sleep problems such as insomnia, sleep apnea, and restless leg syndrome may be more common in those with MS. If you experience these issues, talk to your healthcare provider about treatments for better sleep.



EXERCISE

Staying active can help support your overall health and well-being and can help manage some MS symptoms. Exercise can look different for everyone. Walking, taking the stairs, stretching, weight training and swimming are all great options. Exercise can keep your bones and muscles strong, improve mood and fatigue, and support a healthy brain and heart. Talk to your healthcare provider about exercise, and remember to start slow, stay cool, and stretch after activities.



ORAL HEALTH

MS medications may cause dry mouth, swollen gums, or other discomfort. Some people with MS may have a hard time brushing their teeth because of depression, fatigue, weak grip, or shaking. All these factors can worsen oral health, making it harder to eat properly. Schedule regular dental checkups and ask your dentist how to clean your teeth properly and which products are best for you.

OPEN ARMS IS HERE TO HELP

YOUR OPEN ARMS MENU

Clients with MS may choose any Open Arms menu according to their health needs. While we do not have a menu planned specifically for MS, each of our menus features important nutrients that you need to manage your health. If you have other health conditions or side effects, our nutrition team members are available to help you choose a menu that best fits your needs.

OTHER RESOURCES

For more information about MS and nutrition, scan the QR codes or visit these webpages:



National Multiple Sclerosis Society: <https://www.nationalmssociety.org/Living-Well-With-MS/Diet-Exercise-Healthy-Behaviors/Diet-Nutrition>



Multiple Sclerosis Trust: <https://mstrust.org.uk/information-support/diet-ms/healthy-eating>

GET IN TOUCH WITH OPEN ARMS

Open Arms has a team of Registered Dietitians that provide free-of-cost nutrition education and counseling to Open Arms clients over the phone. If you have a question about your meals or want to schedule a one-on-one call, contact the Open Arms nutrition team!

Our Registered Dietitians can help:

- Recommend a menu based on your needs and preferences
- Answer your questions about food, nutrition, and health
- Provide nutrition coaching to support you in reaching your health goals
- Suggest additional food resources if you need them
- Give you meal and snack ideas according to your likes, dislikes, and medical needs
- Provide nutrition information about Open Arms meals, such as calorie, nutrient, and allergen information



612-767-7333 Ask to speak with a registered dietitian



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