

GET FIT: NEW YEAR'S WORK OUT PLAN

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Keep Moving with MS –

The benefits of exercise



The news is irrefutable – regular, moderate physical exercise is good for the body, mind and spirit. Exercise is effective for weight control, boosting key health factors like raising levels of good HDL cholesterol and reducing the chance of contracting higher blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and certain types of cancer. African Americans are particularly at risk for many of these conditions and therefore benefit exponentially when making regular activity a part of their lives.

The complexity created for African Americans diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis when it comes to exercise is real. Multiple Sclerosis affects the central nervous system which includes the brain, spinal cord and optic nerve. Symptoms include poor balance, fatigue, weakness and lack of coordination. These symptoms, which are often combined with depression, can discourage individuals living with MS from pursuing an exercise regimen which can, in fact, greatly improve their overall health and level of wellness.

African Americans have an added incentive to do everything possible to get and stay fit because they are likely to experience more relapses than their Caucasian neighbors with MS. Though it's important to listen to your bodies when developing an exercise program that works best for you, good options include swimming, which doesn't raise the body's core temperature as many people with MS are sensitive to heat and yoga which helps to improve balance. However, since MS symptoms are as varied as the individuals who are diagnosed with the disease some people turn to walking to cycling or even aerobics to help better manage their MS symptoms.

Studies have shown that exercise can combat the loss of strength caused by a sedentary lifestyle and be therapeutic for such MS-related problems as spasticity and poor balance. Exercise builds muscle strength and cardiovascular function. Should an attack or exacerbation of MS require a person with MS to take a break from physical activity, there is a better foundation on which to rebuild once the symptoms subside.

Remember that all exercise is beneficial, although the positive effects fade if you discontinue your exercise regimen. The important thing is to find what works for you and stick with it. And with so many exercise options available, if one activity does not fit your needs at the moment you can certainly move to another type of exercise. The key is to get moving and keep moving.

Choose an activity that fits your lifestyle and personality. Many African Americans living with MS already had

exercise routines that fit their lifestyle. Remember, with some modifications you can continue to do the things you love. Exercise need not be a burden, just 20 minutes of activity everyday yields benefits equal to those found in the most strenuous gym workouts.

Always begin by checking in with your physician or physical or occupational therapist about the types of exercise most likely to fit your current level of activity and special considerations associated with the MS. Then, consider your individual temperament. Do you prefer a solitary exercise routine? Then look to activities like walking or swimming. Do you prefer competitive sports? Then tennis or racquetball may be for you. Also, find an environment that is comfortable for you – perhaps a home gym set-up would be ideal or gathering friends for a walk through your local park district is low cost and gives you exercise buddies. And of course share as much info as you feel comfortable with your exercise partners so they understand the challenges that might limit your participation. Still have concerns? Talk with the folks at your local National MS Society Chapter for helpful tips on getting started with a regime.

Exercises to Consider

Aerobics	Stretching
Balance Ball	Swimming
Cycling	T'ai Chi
Gardening	Tennis
Home Gym	Walking
Horseback Riding	Water Sports
Housework	Weight Training
Pilates	Yoga
Rowing/Rafting	Zumba

An excellent resource for exercise programs helpful to people living with MS is the National Multiple Sclerosis Society. You can find information about these and other exercise/wellness programs on their website www.nationalMSSociety.org or by calling 1-800-344-4867.