The Link Between MS and Appetite Changes

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How MS and Appetite Are Connected

Having multiple sclerosis (MS) can impact your appetite — some people experience an increased appetite, while others experience MS and appetite loss. There are several reasons for this. Let’s examine some of the most common factors that impact appetite, as well as some solutions.

Medication and Hunger

Medications used to treat MS have the potential to increase or decrease your appetite, either due to direct actions or side effects. For example, if you are taking a medication that makes you feel nauseous, MS and appetite loss will occur.

Many people who suffer from MS need steroids frequently or continuously. If you are taking steroidal medications to reduce inflammation and discomfort you are very likely to experience an increase in appetite. If this increased appetite is causing undesirable weight gain, consider these tips:

- Check with your health care provider to see if other medication options are available for you.
- Fill up on healthy, bulky foods instead of junk foods. Fresh fruits, whole grains and vegetables are great choices.
- Keep simple, easy-to-reach-for, healthy snacks on hand. Nuts are a terrific option. Eating a handful of nuts is satisfying and supplies healthy fats, which may reduce inflammation and discomfort associated with your illness. Melon is another good choice. It is low in calories and rich in healthy antioxidants and other phytochemicals. Melon is also filling and hydrating.
- Consider eating six small meals a day to avoid feeling ravenous.
- Consume lots of liquids.

The Impact of Stress

Sometimes MS and appetite loss or increase is due to the stress of living with MS. People living with MS are more than twice as likely to experience a major depressive disorder than the rest of the population, and anxiety and insomnia are often present. Eating to relieve anxiety and depression is common. If limited energy, mobility and lack of sleep occur, you may eat to feel better or relieve boredom. Meanwhile, some people lose interest in food when struggling with anxiety and depression.

If you believe that MS and appetite loss or increase are due to changes in your mood; seek professional help. Anti-depressant or anti-anxiety medications may be needed. Counseling may be beneficial. Learn how to manage stress and meditate, and seek spiritual guidance if you belong to a faith community.

Self-help programs, including online support groups, are an excellent option. By regaining control of your emotions, you will find that your appetite will normalize, and even more importantly, you will begin to feel like

yourself again. Living with MS is hard, but you do not have to go it alone.

Fatigue and Appetite

In addition to emotional fatigue caused by insomnia, depression and stress, you are very likely to suffer from physical fatigue. If you are exhausted, you may not have the energy to prepare food or even eat. A holistic approach to relieving fatigue is necessary. Do you need help with chores? Can you delegate a person or group of people to help out with things like buying groceries? Are you able to prepare meals?

Try taking advantage of prepared meals or simple foods, such as sandwiches. If your community offers low-cost home delivery of meals for people with medical challenges, take advantage of the service. These are just a few of many options to consider which may improve the combination of MS and appetite loss.

MS and Drinking Habits

You may not want to drink enough fluids due to a fear of urinary incontinence. It is critical for your health that you do not let worries about incontinence take precedence over consuming enough fluids. You must drink, even if you are incontinent.

Dehydration will make you feel poorly, decrease your resistance to disease and put you at risk of complications. Adequate fluid intake is needed for your skin to stay healthy, to fight urinary and other types of infections and keep respiratory secretions thin so that you may get rid of them easily. If you get an infection, your body will be stressed, your MS symptoms will intensify and your energy will decrease further.

If you have a hard time drinking liquids, ask your health care provider to refer you to a speech and language therapist for a swallowing evaluation. A speech and language therapist can evaluate your swallowing difficulties and make recommendations based upon their findings. You may need to add a thickener to liquids so that you can swallow them without difficulty. Exercises may help you to maintain the strength and coordination of your muscles used for swallowing, and medications may be beneficial as well.

Managing Constipation

If you suffer from constipation, bloating and gas you may not to want to eat due to feelings of fullness. Additionally, some people try to limit their intake if bowel incontinence is a problem. As with urinary incontinence, do not let the fear of bowel incontinence prevent you from enjoying food and obtaining the nutrients that you need.

To combat bloating and constipation, drink fluids. Try to obtain a minimum of 35 grams of fiber each day. If you cannot obtain this amount from your diet, check with you health care provider regarding fiber supplements, stool softeners and other means to ensure regular bowel movements.

Let your health care provider know if constipation is an issue. Sometimes constipation is caused by medication. If you use narcotic pain medications to manage discomfort, you are at a higher risk of developing constipation. There are fast-acting medications available that can relieve constipation related to the use of narcotics.

Malabsorption Problems and MS

Some studies indicate that people who have MS suffer from malabsorption problems. Their bodies cannot break down, absorb and utilize nutrients from food efficiently. Loose stools, constipation and deficiency diseases may result.

Malabsorption problems are treated preventatively and symptomatically. A good-quality multivitamin is essential. Vitamins B12, C and E are especially beneficial if you have MS. Supplementation with essential fatty acids in the form of fish, flax, borage, evening primrose, or hemp seed oil is important. These oils enhance mood, reduce inflammation and offer a wide array of healing benefits for your body.

Eating Challenges With Advanced MS

If your disease is advanced, you may not have much energy to chew your food or tremors may make it difficult prepare meals or feed yourself. You may suffer from visual changes or impaired concentration.

If this occurs, consult your healthcare team. A wide array of tools are available that can make eating easier and more enjoyable; assistive devices can make the handling of utensils easier and medications that boost the appetite are available. Plus, you can make some simple changes to recipes to turn them into MS recipes that will be easier to eat.

What Does This Mean for You?

If you have MS and are not experiencing any appetite or eating problems, that is fabulous! However, if you are experiencing issues, it is important to address them. Appetite, eating and health are all interconnected.

Be aware that you are not alone. Every year new strategies and tools are available to assist with eating and meal preparation. They aid the conservation of energy and make eating more enjoyable. Stay informed and be willing to seek help as needed. Save your energy and be adaptable.

You have options. Help is available.