Six Lifestyle Changes for Better Living With MS

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Tips for Better Living With MS

Once the dust has settled after an MS diagnosis, it can be difficult to contemplate lifestyle changes, but there are a number of changes you can make to improve your prognosis.

I was in denial for the first five years post-diagnosis. I carried on drinking too much, smoking, partying, eating whatever I liked and generally living an unhealthy lifestyle. No wonder my symptoms took their toll and disability set in. I often wonder how my MS would be now if I'd made some lifestyle changes a few years ago.

In the last year or two, since my disability has become more noticeable, I've made some living with MS changes that have helped me feel better, but there's always more I can do.

Living With MS: Six Changes You Can Make Today

Here are a few suggestions to improve your overall quality of life while living with MS.

Give Up Smoking

This is extremely important. When I was diagnosed in 2008, I asked my consultant about MS and smoking. Every smoker knows they ought to quit smoking, but I wanted to know if smoking would affect my MS specifically. He said it wouldn't so I happily carried on puffing away.

I remember thinking that as I was unlucky enough to have MS, I was unlikely to get anything else nasty, so this justified smoking more! I also convinced myself I needed to smoke to help me get through it.

Research now suggests that smoking may be linked to causing or triggering MS and also accelerating progression. I wonder how my symptoms would have progressed if I'd stopped smoking when I was diagnosed. I'll never know the answer to that but know I'll never go back to smoking now. I use an e-cigarette when I feel the urge to smoke, and this has been life-changing.

Eat Well

I've made significant changes to my diet over the past few years. I avoid gluten and dairy and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. I've lost quite a few pounds as a result which makes getting around so much easier. It's also easier for friends and family to help me up if I fall!

There are numerous diets for MS which all claim to alleviate symptoms, but I think eating as well as you can will go a long way to making you feel better. Since giving up gluten and dairy, my fatigue has dramatically reduced, and I generally feel more alert and energized. I have smoothies with spinach, strawberries and coconut milk and add kelp powder and nutritional yeast to optimize vitamins and minerals.

Drink plenty of water – this will help with constipation, and also eat lots of food that's high in fiber. Take supplements too, such as vitamin D and omega-3.

Avoid Over-Heating

Being too hot has a huge effect on my symptoms. My shower was too hot this morning, for example, and I found myself dragging my right leg behind me because I couldn't lift it! It got back to normal after a rest and a cool down, but it was still alarming!

In the summer I make sure I wear natural fibers and always sit in the shade, or my legs refuse to work! I drink cold drinks and go inside when it gets too hot. In the winter I have to be careful about getting too hot in the central heating. I wear layers so I can remove a few at work when team members turn the heating up!

Eating a hot meal can also overheat me from the inside, so I always have cold water on hand to cool me down.

Drink In Moderation

Dull but essential. I love a glass of wine at the weekend and wouldn't want to give it up, but I have to be careful about how much I drink, especially when I'm out. I find that my legs feel weaker and my symptoms can feel worse when I drink too much. This has led to disastrous consequences!

My legs gave way in a restaurant bathroom once, and the owner had to heave me up onto a chair and then lift me into a cab at the end of the evening! Luckily the owner was my brother, which reduced the humiliation slightly, but I was still mortified!

Exercise

There is always something that can be done, even with limited mobility! One of my new years' resolutions is to do more exercise as I think it will help enormously.

Planning

MS doesn't mean you have to give up your social life, and you just need to be proactive and plan ahead. I always phone restaurants and ask where the bathrooms are and how many stairs they have. My friends and I get together at houses I can manage, with downstairs bathrooms and no stairs, and we always go to places I know I can access.

The Takeaway

All of the above are living with MS changes that have helped me, but no two MSers are the same, so some might be more relevant than others. I make sure I factor in as much rest as possible too to recharge my batteries and make me ready for anything!