Can You Manage MS Symptoms With Diet?

by ABIGAIL BUDD

Can an MS Diet Help Symptoms?

I first got interested in special diets for multiple sclerosis (MS) when I stopped having noticeable relapses and worried my MS had become secondary progressive. My neurologist told me he doesn't believe in labeling people so wouldn't confirm it, but my MRI scan didn't show any disease activity, indicating secondary progressive multiple sclerosis (SPMS).

The problem with SPMS is that there's no treatment available yet. Disease-modifying drugs (DMDs) don't have an effect on SPMS, so I stopped putting myself through the hell of side effects and stopped taking my medication.

Research is going on all the time, and there are rumors of a new drug being trialed with some success, but for now, those of us with SPMS are, basically, on the MS scrap heap!

To me, it felt like there was nothing I could do that would have an impact on my MS and that was a scary thought. Having no control over the progression of my disease made me feel hopeless, and I didn't want to give in to depression and misery.

Is It Possible to Treat Multiple Sclerosis With a Diet?

I reached out to friends on social media and discovered there are an army of people who swear by diet as a treatment for their MS. I heard some incredible tales of recovery so began to take notice.

Unfortunately, all the evidence seems to be anecdotal. As I investigated it in more detail, it became clear there's no real scientific evidence for any particular diet, and they seem to contradict each other so which one should we follow?

I'll look into some of the most popular to see if I can find any answers.

The Swank Diet

Developed in the 1940's by Dr. Roy Swank, the Swank Diet is, perhaps one of the most well known of the special diets for MS.

The principles of this diet include restricting the amount of fat you can eat to no more than 15 grams a day (saturated) and 20-50 grams (unsaturated) It also limits the amount of red meat and oily fish you can eat although you can eat unlimited amounts of white fish.

Research into this diet hasn't proved any benefits and haven't been well designed, with high drop-out rates, so it's hard to draw any conclusions. The good news is following this kind of diet shouldn't cause you any harm as long as you watch your protein intake; cutting out meat can lead to protein deficits, so you need to find

alternatives such as fish, beans, and pulses.

This diet can also lead to low energy, so care needs to be taken to maintain energy levels, something MSers needs to be aware of.

Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis Diet

The overcoming multiple sclerosis (OMS) diet programme was developed by George Jelinek in 1999 following his diagnosis of MS. It combines different elements including diet, exercise, meditation, medication and vitamin D.

The principles are similar to the Swank diet in that it recommends cutting out dairy and meat and reducing fat intake. It also advocates supplements such as omega-3 oil and vitamin D.

Like the Swank Diet, research into the benefits of the OMS diet has been inconclusive but following it isn't thought to be harmful. You also need to be aware of your protein intake and it may not be suitable for you if you have high energy needs or are under-weight.

The Best Bet Diet

This diet also recommends avoiding different food types, including all dairy, grains and red meat. It advises you to get protein from chicken, turkey, and fish and suggests allergy tests to find out which other foods should be avoided.

There are also 18 supplements it recommends, and it's worth remembering that such a high number of supplements can be expensive and there's no conclusive evidence of any benefits.

Paleo Diets Including the Wahls Protocol

Paleo or Palaeolithic diets are modeled around what our ancestors would have eaten and suggested our bodies are best adapted to eating. The foods include meat (including red meat) fish, vegetables, nuts, and fruit. Foods to be avoided are dairy, grains, pulses, potatoes and all processed food.

Again, there is little research into the benefits, but a paleo diet isn't considered bad for you as long as you make sure you're getting enough nutrients considering you're cutting out whole food groups. The amount of meat recommended is higher than what is thought to be healthy and can also be expensive.

Next page: Abi's experience with special MS diets.

My Experience With Diets

I started "loosely" following the Wahl Protocol around four years ago. I say loosely because it's hard to stick to It religiously all the time.

It's a paleo diet but comes in three stages so you can start on the easier to follow stage and work your way up to the Paleo plus. The Paleo Plus involves cutting out gluten, dairy and all grains and pulses.

It's a ketogenic diet that involves low carbohydrate (carbs) and high fat so, unlike the diets above, it recommends you eat lots of red meat and offal and only get your carbs from vegetables. Fruit is restricted to low carb berries only, and you mustn't eat high carb vegetables such as root vegetables or potatoes. The high fat comes in the form of coconut milk as you must avoid dairy.

The thinking behind the diet makes perfect sense to me and Dr. Terry Wahls, who developed it, has MS and speaks from experience.

She’s interested in healing the body at a cellular level and believes certain foods have an inflammatory effect while others can have anti-inflammatory properties. She believes red meat and offal can heal the cells, but gluten and other grains can have a devastating impact.

Benefits of Diet I Noticed

The state of “Ketosis” in the body created by eating low carbs and high fats means the body is burning fat more efficiently. This results in dramatic weight loss, and I went from a UK size 18 to a size 10 in just a few months.

I’ve never been this thin as an adult, and I must admit I feel so much better. It’s easier to lug myself around now I weigh less, and anyone who is helping me when I fall gets a much easier time.

I also notice my energy levels are improved, and my fatigue virtually disappears.

I thought it would be hard to cut out dairy, but I didn’t find it too difficult. I drink green tea these days or black coffee, and if I eat cheese or cream by accident, it tastes strange to me now. I also couldn’t get my head around cutting out carbs completely. I thought I’d be exhausted and feel starving all the time, but that didn’t happen. As long as I make sure I have enough vegetables on the plate, I feel full.

The Difficulties I Had With Diets

Following a restrictive diet involves a dramatic lifestyle change and I find it hard to stick to all the time. I have gluten binges sometimes where I can’t resist toast and pizza, and family life is hard when I have to eat differently to everyone else.

Perhaps this is why I haven’t had the same dramatic results that Dr. Terry Wahls described. When I'm strict, I start feeling great so need to avoid cheating and giving in to gluten binges.

Eating out or going to friends is difficult too as I don’t feel comfortable with inflicting my long list of dietary requirements on other people. This is when I tend to cheat, but I can still make informed choices. I avoid pasta or potatoes and try and chose rice instead, for example.

The Takeaway

So, my anecdotal evidence is as inconclusive as all the other research carried out into special MS diets. My advice would be to get yourself a copy of the diets above and do some research of your own. It may be that one diet will speak to you more loudly than the others and you can give it a go.

Honestly, it worries me that some MS diets suggest avoiding red meat while the Wahls Protocol recommends the opposite. It would be good if research offered conclusive proof, so I’m not putting my faith in the wrong diet!

What seems to be consistent advice though is to avoid processed foods and eat a wide variety of fresh fruit and vegetables. Naturally, eating like this is expensive, but planning can keep costs down.

Most special MS diets suggest avoiding dairy and gluten so maybe cutting these foods out first will have an impact on your symptoms.

We know that experts still don’t know what causes MS, but one area of research is focussing on why it’s on the rise in parts of the world where it was previously unheard of. One theory is that western diets are spreading to these countries and processed foods are increasing the risk of developing MS.

This is a scary thought, and it gives me hope that changing the way I eat may have an impact on the prognosis of my condition.