**Diet**

**Is there an MS diet?**

by Judi Hasson

There are low-cal diets and low-carb diets, liquid diets, vegan diets, diets that claim to fight aging, arthritis, autism, and anxiety—and that’s only the “A”s.

For people with MS, many doctors recommend a traditional low-cal, low-fat diet; others promote strict limits on certain food groups. Or they emphasize certain foods such as fatty fish, apples, blueberries, broccoli or almonds.

The varied recommendations and the lack of a distinct game plan can leave people with MS just plain confused.

“While it is unlikely that a simple diet will be therapeutic in MS, recent data regarding the roles of vitamins such as vitamin D and niacin in maintaining a healthy immune and nervous system suggest that we should pay more attention to nutrition,” said Dr. Peter Calabresi, who heads the Multiple Sclerosis Center at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.

“No one is completely sure what works and what doesn’t,” said Dr. Heidi Crayton, director of the MS Center of Greater Washington, DC. “There are guidelines for smart eating, but there is no fail-safe plan. I tell my patients with MS that it’s really important to have a healthy diet.

What do experts say about the thicket of claims?
Can a diet moderate MS?

That includes two liters of water and 30 grams of fiber every day, a palate with bright, colorful foods, and foods that have high nutritional value. Decrease fats and refined sugar,” Dr. Crayton added.

Some doctors who look to a more aggressive eating plan to deal with MS support the Swank Diet, a stringent low-fat diet developed by Dr. Roy Swank more than 30 years ago. It bans all dairy products, glutsens (found in wheat), legumes (meaning beans and peas) and virtually all saturated fat from animal sources. It stresses fish and fish oils.

Dr. Swank reported that 95% of patients who adopted this very low-fat diet following an early diagnosis of MS had a remarkably good chance of remaining free from further disability.

“They have to follow the diet strictly because even small amounts of fat make a big difference,” Dr. Swank said. He asserted that patients who had a daily intake of eight grams of saturated fat (one hamburger or two ounces of cheddar cheese) significantly increased their risks.

Dr. Swank published his study in the British medical periodical *The Lancet* in 1990.

“Most people in this country expect to be cured by a pill, and to have a cure that is almost instantaneous. With the low-fat diet, people actually have to work to get better,” Dr. Swank told Dr. John A. McDougall, founder and medical director of the McDougall Program, which promotes this very low-fat approach.

The problem is other researchers...
have not duplicated Dr. Swank’s results, and there is no generally accepted proof that the Swank diet really controls MS. There is anecdotal evidence from people with MS who say this diet makes them feel better.

Dr. Vijayshree Yadav, a neurologist at the Oregon Health & Science University MS Center in Portland, Oregon, said there is little current research on the Swank diet. In fact, “diet has not been paid that much attention,” she said. “But diet can make a difference.”

She advises her MS patients to go low-fat: “It’s healthy. And it’s such a low-risk intervention that I don’t see any reason not to recommend it.” She also said a new study is expected to get underway next year at the Oregon facility to take a hard clinical look at the impact of diet on MS.

“Diets have been used for MS from time immemorial. If they worked, we wouldn’t be still talking about them,” said Dr. Randall T. Schapiro, the director of the Schapiro Center for Multiple Sclerosis in Minneapolis. Like many other MS specialists, Dr. Schapiro recommends a healthy diet that is low in saturated fat. Other than that, he said no specific diet has shown any long-term benefit.

According to Dr. Allen Bowling, director of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Program at the Rocky Mountain MS Center in Englewood, Colo., it may be reasonable for some people with MS to take a fish oil supplement that includes one to two grams of EPA plus DHA. He also notes that it’s wise to beware of overstated claims either for or against specific foods or supplements. He agrees with Dr. Yadav that research on MS and diet is very limited.

All these doctors agree that while there is no concrete evidence that a specific diet controls MS, there is every good reason to eat a healthy diet and avoid things that are known to be bad for everybody. So while there is no true consensus, an MS plan might look like this:

- Cut back on saturated fat. That means avoiding highly marbled red meat, butter, cheese and other full-fat dairy products.
- Use oils from vegetables, seeds, and fish. Try butter substitutes, such as soft or tub margarine, but use sparingly and look for “0 trans fats” on the label.
- Eat skinless chicken or turkey, lean meats trimmed of visible fat, or go meatless with vegetable proteins from beans, lentils, soy or nuts.
  - Consume five servings of fruits and vegetables a day, choosing the brightly colored fiber-rich varieties.
  - Eat three to four servings of whole-grain products daily. There is no concrete evidence that gluten has any impact on MS.
  - Exercise to stretch muscles affected by MS, stay in shape, manage mood, fight fatigue, promote bone health, and maintain a healthy weight.
  - Be cautious with caffeine and alcohol.

Judi Hasson is a Washington, DC-based journalist who was diagnosed with MS in 2007.
Healthy Living

DIET

Is there a diet that helps people with MS?

by Denise Nowack, RD

When I’m asked, “Is there an MS diet?” I say “Yes,” even though I know no diet has yet been proved to be an effective treatment. I say that because it’s the best answer to the hidden question, “Can diet make my MS better?”

Yes! Good nutrition has a positive impact on some MS symptoms and also lowers the risk of other diseases and disorders. The goal is optimal health throughout a lifetime. A diet that can make MS easier to live with begins with a look at fats.

About those unhealthy fats

Saturated fats have long been associated with high blood pressure, heart disease, stroke and some cancers. These fats are usually solid at room temperature and can be found in highly marbled meats, the skin on poultry, rich, creamy cheeses, butter and whole milk dairy products. There are saturated fats in coconut, palm and palm kernel oils (often called tropical oils), and cocoa butter, too.

Trans fats act just like saturated fats in the body and are typically found in shortening, margarine, cookies, crackers, snack foods and fried foods. Most trans fats are manmade through a process called hydrogenation—where a liquid fat like corn oil is made into a more solid form, like margarine or shortening.

About those healthy fats

Unsaturated fats play a very important role in diet, supporting many essential functions. They are important components of myelin and other central nervous system tissues. They include both monounsaturated fats—found in olive, canola and peanut oils, avocados, and nuts including almonds, hazelnuts, and peanuts, and polyunsaturated fats—found in other vegetable oils such as safflower, sunflower seed, corn and soybean oils, seeds, and nuts including walnuts and Brazil nuts. When these fats replace saturated fats in the diet they can help to lower cholesterol and the risk of heart disease.

There is some limited research showing that certain types of polyunsaturated fats—specifically omega-3 fatty acids and omega-6 fatty acids—could actually have a beneficial effect on MS. In the context of a low-fat diet, they showed a tendency to decrease the severity and duration of MS attacks. Additionally, the omega-3s may improve mood and memory.

Omega-3s can be found in fatty fish like mackerel, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon. These fish contain two omega-3s—EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and DHA (docosahexaenoic acid). For specific amounts in fish go to fn.cfs.purdue.edu/fish4health/NutritionalContentofFish/omega3.pdf.

Plant sources such as soybeans, canola oil, walnuts or flaxseeds contain ALA (alpha-linolenic acid), a less potent form of omega-3.

Omega-6 fats are in safflower, sunflower, and sesame seed oils, in other seeds and nuts, and in leafy vegetables and grains.

Fitting in the fat

While fat is an important part of a healthy diet, moderation is key. Leading health agencies recommend that less that 30% of total daily calories come from fats and that unhealthy saturated and trans fats be limited to no more than 7% of the total.
to provide greater benefit than any do alone. This is one more reason to choose foods over supplements.

Finding antioxidant-rich foods is easy. Look for brightly colored fruits and vegetables—red, orange, yellow, green and blue—and include four to six servings every day.

**Those evil carbs?**

Carbohydrates provide the most desirable form of fuel for the human body and brain. However, popular low-carb diets have led the public to believe that carbs are an unnecessary evil.

True, not all carbohydrates are created equal. Much like fats, some promote good health while others increase the risk of diseases like diabetes and heart disease. The carbs in highly processed foods such as white bread, white rice, baked goods, or sweetened beverages are best avoided. But those in fruits, vegetables, beans, and whole grains provide essential fuel along with vitamins, minerals, fiber, and other important nutrients.

**About antioxidants—a catch for people with MS**

Antioxidants protect cells from damage caused by free radicals, or oxidants. This damage may contribute to aging, cancer and heart disease. There is preliminary evidence suggesting that oxidants may be a factor in the damage to myelin and nerve fibers in MS. Sounds good for antioxidants.

But there’s a catch. Antioxidants, like vitamins C and E, may stimulate the immune system. In MS, where an overactive immune system appears to be part of the disease process, stimulation may not be desirable. The safety of taking antioxidant supplements for people with MS has not been established; the potential for harm is unknown.

Food sources appear to be the safest and best approach. In addition to vitamins, there are many other natural compounds in plant foods that function as antioxidants. Carotenoids and flavonoids are among them. These nutrients work synergistically

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**Nutrition Facts**

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**Nutrition Label, Butter**

- Saturated Fat: 7 g
- + Trans Fat: 0 g
- Combined Amount: 7 g

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**Nutrition Label, Stick Margarine**

- Saturated Fat: 2 g
- + Trans Fat: 3 g
- Combined Amount: 5 g
Healthy Living

- Snack on dried fruits and ready-to-eat raw vegetables
- Have fruit at every meal

Start slow. Fiber should be added gradually. Too much fiber too fast can cause gas, cramps, diarrhea … and discouragement!

Don’t forget fluids. Fiber absorbs water, so as you increase fiber increase fluids, too.

For a longer list of fiber-rich foods, go here: nationalmssociety.org/diet.

What diet can do for MS symptoms: fatigue
Fatigue can make it easy to miss meals and then rely on getting a boost from high-calorie fast foods. That further contributes to fatigue by depriving you of the quality food your body needs to function effectively.

Fight fatigue these ways:
- When eating or cooking feel overwhelming, try smaller meals and regular snacks. Don’t go more than four hours without eating something.
- Stock up on ready-to-eat healthy snack items to help you resist low-nutrient convenience foods.
- When you do cook, conserve energy: Gather the ingredients you need before you start. Use a tall stool to minimize standing. Use precut, prewashed vegetables.
- When you do cook, double up on recipes and freeze meals for the next time your energy is low.

What diet can do for MS symptoms: bladder
It might be tempting to avoid beverages as a strategy to manage bladder problems. This can lead to dry mouth, loss of appetite, swallowing difficulties, deficiencies in certain nutrients, and increased risk for urinary tract infections. Keep the fluids flowing:
- Take regular water breaks during the day
- “Water down” your meals

- Refresh yourself at snack time with diluted fruit juice, low-fat milk or yogurt drinks, sparkling water, cool herb teas
- Travel with a supply of water
- Limit drinks like cola, coffee, and caffeinated teas; they can be bladder irritants.

Diet and exercise are perfect partners
There are many reasons why a person with MS may gain or lose weight—but controlling weight is the same story for everyone: calories we don’t use for fuel are stored as fat. Together, physical activity and good nutrition are the perfect combination for weight control. Not only does activity burn calories, it can:
- Decrease feelings of fatigue (Really. Even with MS.)
- Decrease symptoms of depression
- Maintain regular bowel and bladder functions
  - Minimize the risk of skin breakdown and irritation
  - Make the most of muscle strength, or even build strength, depending on your program
    - Increase endurance
    - Maximize range of motion and joint flexibility
    - Protect bone mass
    - Improve cognition.

The impact of special needs
A final note: people with MS may have special needs. Always talk with your health-care professional about your special circumstances.

There is much more information in the Society booklet, Food for Thought, which I’ve just revised. Read or download it at nationalmssociety.org/diet—or call 1-800-344-4867 and ask for a free copy.

Denise Nowack, RD, is a registered dietitian and executive vice president of Chapter Programs for the Southern California Chapter.
Books for easier cooking

by Greta Herron

Preparing nutritious meals is important for good health, but cooking can seem a Herculean task when MS symptoms flare. Before you reach for the take-out menus, consider some cookbooks by authors who have found simpler ways to cook.

• Cooking Light’s 5 Ingredient 15 Minute Cookbook is a survival guide for a busy cook; includes a grocery list (amazon.com).

• Rozanne Gold’s Healthy 1-2-3: The Ultimate Three-Ingredient Cookbook, Fat-Free, Low Fat, Low Calorie focuses on a sensible and nutritious approach to meals, with just a few ingredients (bn.com).

• Rachael Ray has a number of books out, including Express Lane Meals: What To Keep On Hand, What To Buy Fresh For The Easiest-Ever 30-Minute Meals (amazon.com). According to customer reviews on Amazon, Rachael Ray’s recipes are fast, but they are more comfort food than nutritious meals.

For set-it and leave-it cooking, a slow cooker may be the way to go.

• Sandra Lee’s “semi-homemade” philosophy has driven her to write Semi-Homemade Slow Cooker Recipes and its sequel Semi-Homemade Slow Cooker Recipes 2, blending big-flavor ingredients and multislice packets into one-pot meals (semihomemade.com/books).

• Beth Hensperger and Julie Kaufmann’s Not Your Mother’s Slow Cooker Cookbook includes tips on choosing a slow cooker along with hundreds of recipes (amazon.com). Using a smaller cooker, or just tired of having too much food? Hensperger also offers Not Your Mother’s Slow Cooker Recipes for Two: For the Small Slow Cooker (amazon.com).

• Cooking Light magazine has two slow cooker books: Slow Cooker by Terri Laschober and Healthy Slow Cooker by Judith Finlayson (amazon.com).

And finally, from one who knows MS personally:

• Nutritionist Elizabeth Yarnell, who was diagnosed in 1999, patented her method of cooking in multiple layers. Try her book Glorious One-Pot Meals: A New Quick & Healthy Approach to Dutch Oven Cooking (gloriouspotmeal.com). Her Web site offers product information, blogs, videos and a subscription to her newsletter.

Greta Herron is on the staff of Momentum.