



**National  
Multiple Sclerosis  
Society**

**MS Learn Online  
Feature Presentation  
Healthy Living: Overall Wellness  
Patricia Kennedy, RN, CNP, MSCN**

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**Tom>>** Welcome to MS Learn Online, I'm Tom Kimball.

**Tracey>>** and I'm Tracey Kimball. It can be easy to ignore our overall wellness when so much attention goes toward a chronic condition like MS.

**Tom>>** That's right. We're back with MS Nurse Pat Kennedy to learn more about healthy living.

**Tracey>>** She points out that while the health care team is critical to your well being, there's a lot YOU can do for yourself.

**>>Patricia Kennedy:** In a perfect world, when I have someone newly diagnosed with MS, really not symptomatic at that time, I would love to have them see a physical therapist. For a physical therapist who understands the fatigue that a person with MS might experience perhaps a heat sensitivity. Just to teach them how to read your body, how to know when you're exercising too hard, when you're exercising not enough, to learn those kinds of things. But it isn't a perfect world, and that often will not be covered by any kind of an insurance plan.

So, what you try to do is talk to people about keeping active, making sure that they keep moving and have an exercise program, but when and if they experience some kind of a problem with any of their function, then that's the time now that we send people to a physical therapist. Physical therapists, we can try to work through it by sending them to a club and having them work with a trainer. But a trainer is not

trained in the nuances of MS, and so it's more important that they see a physical therapist who understands MS.

>> **Rick Sommers:** The thing I like most about physical therapy was actually the stretching that we did.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** But for a person with MS, it's important to stretch. Before you start pumping those muscles, you want to make sure you've stretched them out so injuries don't occur. And then for people with MS who might experience spasticity, we want to make sure that they're stretching out those muscles because that stretch is going to help them from being disabled from their spasticity.

So, it's vital, and it's not something that you need a PT to stretch you so much as you need a PT to teach you how to stretch at home. Or perhaps to train a family member to stretch you if it's hard for you to do all the stretches that are needed.

>> **Rick Sommers:** And that could be a daily routine, stretching.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** It should be a daily routine, actually.

>> **Rick Sommers:** Okay. For people, and the bulk of us who deal with fatigue, how do we incorporate exercise into our life if we're always exhausted?

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** That's such a great question. I know when I speak to groups, I see the eyes rolling in the audience whenever I mention that. What's interesting about exercise and fatigue is that the more that you exercise, but in a sensible way, starting low, going slow, you build up endurance. And as you build up endurance, your fatigue level goes down. And so people find that when they exercise regularly they are less fatigued than they usually are. Now, at 5:00 at night, that's a little hard sell, but it does work.

>> **Rick Sommers:** Let's talk about heat a little bit.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** Well, heat is a factor and it fatigues people much more rapidly than they ordinarily would. One of the reasons why swimming is such a popular exercise for people, because once in the water they're cool and they're able to do a lot more and for a lot longer. If a person is exercising on a machine of some type, having a cold rag around the neck, a towel around the neck, or one of

the cooling devices, wearing a cooling cap. Even some people wear a cooling vest, even though they're heavy and bulky, but it allows them to remain cool, because they would rather exercise and be comfortable than they would to sit back and say it's too hot to exercise.

>> **Rick Sommers:** How about hydration and the importance of drinking water?

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** For any human it's exceedingly important; for MS, it's even more so, because it cools the core. And so if people drink really cool beverages, that will help to cool from within, and that actually will play out that they can exercise longer.

By the same token, if a person were to sit in, let's say, a cool tub of water or a cool shower prior to exercise, you actually get a couple of hours of cooling from that. So, people can do that prior to their exercise period and then go exercise, and that will help to let them exercise with some coolness onboard.

>> **Rick Sommers:** MS and the care that we choose, from an overall standpoint of our health, there are things that we apply to our MS that we can look at on a grander scale as far as staying healthy in life. I think of when I worked in a hospital and the hand-washing and the importance of being clean and being conscious and aware, again, of germs and whatnot. What do you think?

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** I think wellness and health in MS is terribly important, and hand-washing certainly would be a part of that. But what I'm thinking in larger terms, and that is to make sure that people understand that in spite of the fact that they have a disease such as MS, they also have an entire body that needs to be taken care of. And people need to have their regular appointments with their primary physicians or their internal medicine physicians, to make sure that their hearts are healthy and that their blood pressure is good, and that they don't have high blood sugar, and all those kinds of things, because those diseases are far more prevalent and much more likely to cause a person significant health problems in time.

>> **Rick Sommers:** So, we talked about the healthcare team before, but let's fill in some of the blanks on other members who may not be healthcare professionals at all, but have some other components that add to your care as part of that team.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** That's so crucial, I'm glad you asked that question. Because I think we do think so much about our healthcare teams and we don't think so much about the rest of our lives. People who live in a vacuum in general don't do very well. And people with MS tend to do far better if they have a support system, if they surround themselves with people who care for them, love them, and will be there for them. And we know that studies have actually been done looking at MS later in the disease, and people who are more isolated do not do as well physically as people who are involved in some sort of a support system.

But I think that starts from the get-go, and I think what you need are positive people around you, people who will get you going, get you out, get you thinking about other things, and help to exercise your mind, exercise your body, your running buddy, but to have those systems around you.

That also -- it goes a long way to helping to prevent things like depression and anxiety, and that isolation factor. And I think that sometimes when fatigue hits and it's hot outside, you don't want to go outside, and you have a lot of things going on, you just have no energy or will to kind of get up and go out with your buds. And I think it's important that people make that effort to stay connected. And if one falls away, try to fill it with another. As your interests change, try to join groups that might help to support those interests. But it's terribly important for people to do.

>> **Rick Sommers:** When you use the phrase before, "in a perfect world," in a perfect world we'd all wake up and say, "I'm going to exercise today and I'm going to socialize." And there are days that you just don't feel up to it and MS is really kicking your rear-end some days, and that's okay to allow that as well.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** Yes. Yes.

>> **Rick Sommers:** But the key is to -- I like the word "connected," because I think that's really an important part of the whole equation, because it is so isolating to have this diagnosis.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** It is, and one thing that a good support team understands is that you have those days, so that if you have made plans to go to whatever function you had planned to go to with your friends, and then you call them and say, "I'm just not up to it today," these are not friends that are going to badger you. They're going to say, "Okay, we understand," or perhaps cajole you a little and maybe

you'll decide to go anyway. But they're understanding. They're not going to be whipping boys about the fact that you're not necessarily going to be up every day of the year.

>> **Rick Sommers:** Right. And it's important to understand that you need to surround yourself with people like that, if indeed you know people like that, and hopefully we all do.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** You teach them.

>> **Rick Sommers:** Yes.

>>**Patricia Kennedy:** And if they learn and they understand, they're good friends. If they don't, then perhaps you need to have other friends.

**Tom>>** Well, we're certainly fortunate to have some really good friends who give both of us wonderful support.

**Tracey>>** Yes, we are. We'd like to thank Pat Kennedy for sharing her thoughts and ideas on healthy living. If you would like more information on wellness topics such as nutrition, staying active, support networks or developing a healthcare team go to the National MS Society website.

**Tom>>** We will see you again soon!