

Can health behaviours modify disease progression in MS?

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There is a great deal of interest within the MS community, as with many other chronic health conditions, as to whether individuals can influence the course of their disease through lifestyle changes. Over recent years, research has increasingly focused on this area.

New findings published by researchers at the School of Nursing, University of Texas at Austin, builds on this research with an 11-year study of over 600 people with MS who completed annual surveys on their health behaviours and their physical limitations. The research was published in the [Disability and Health Journal](#), in March.

The survey included topics such as nutrition, interpersonal relationships, exercise, stress management, health responsibilities, spiritual growth, self-rated health and barriers to health promoting behaviour. The results were analysed to take into account factors such as age and time since diagnosis.

The study showed that out of the range of health behaviours examined, exercise was most strongly associated with a slower rate of accumulation of physical limitations across the whole population. This is in keeping with other studies that have also shown an association between exercise and better outcomes for people with MS.

In contrast, the researchers found that higher scores for stress management, health responsibilities and barriers were associated with higher levels of physical limitations across the group. This suggests that people with higher levels of disability do experience increased barriers to optimising their healthcare choices. People with higher disability also reported taking a more active interest in their healthcare choices (Health responsibilities) and used stress management techniques to cope with increased physical limitations.

On an individual basis the researchers also found that higher scores for spiritual growth from year to year, indicated by answers to questions such as 'I am aware of what is important to me', and 'I feel connected to a force greater than myself', were associated with lower levels of physical limitations over the 11 year period. The researchers speculate that while positive attitudes could assist in staving off the effects of the disease, this result could also reflect that individuals who engage in spiritual growth-related health behaviours may perceive their growing physical impairments as less limiting.

The researchers found no association between nutrition and levels of physical disability. The role of nutrition and disability level is complicated and further research is needed in this area (read an earlier article on nutrition [here](#)).

While this study cannot definitively identify whether health behaviours were the cause of, or the result of, changes in physical limitations, it does indicate that some health behaviours can have a significant impact on disease course for people with MS.

Lifestyle factors are important since people with MS can take control of these factors to limit the impact of MS across their lifetime. In particular, physical activity now sits alongside other health behaviours, such as quitting smoking, as an important addition to disease modifying treatment.

This is also the key message of the recently launched [MS Brain Health: Time Matters](#) initiative, that seeks to maximise brain health in MS through earlier diagnosis and treatment, better disease monitoring and improved treatment strategies, and improving access to treatments and symptom management.

You can access videos, resources and read the MS Brain Health report at their website [here](#)