

new hope for MS.

Although there is no known cure for this disorder, dietary changes, chiropractic, acupuncture and massage can all help to ease symptoms, says **Louise O'Connor.**

It is estimated over 2.5 million people worldwide are affected by multiple sclerosis (MS). The term MS refers to the numerous sclerotic or scar-like lesions that silently form on the nervous system over many years. In time, MS interferes with the transmission of nerve impulses throughout the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. The symptoms of this debilitating disease generally appear between the ages of 20 and 40; women are three times more likely to be diagnosed with MS than men.

For many, the first clue that something is wrong is unusual eye pain and vision loss. This symptom is called optic neuritis and is due to inflammation of the optic nerve. It is uncertain exactly what causes MS and a clear-cut cure for this frightening disease remains elusive. For this reason many seek the support of non-drug therapies and a holistic approach. Natural health practitioners regard MS as a complex, multifactorial neurological disorder with a number of contributing factors.

Communication breakdown

Myelin is specialised fatty tissue that provides a covering, or insulation for nerves. Like the insulation on electrical wiring, myelin allows nerve impulses to fire effectively. However, in MS, the patient's immune system attacks this protective myelin sheath, causing damage, which is called demyelination. This immune-mediated assault disrupts normal nerve firing, leading to pins and needles in the hands and feet, numbness, loss of balance, gait difficulties, cognitive problems, slurred speech, blurred vision, or difficulty walking.

As more nerves are affected there is progressive interference with how well the nervous system functions. Nerve signals become delayed, disrupted or blocked altogether. Symptoms of MS vary according to which parts of the nervous system are affected. Over time, the effects of the disease become permanent and debilitating. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) confirms the appearance of MS lesions.

Conventional medical management focuses on preventing these recurring symptoms and slowing the destruction

of myelin. Anti-inflammatory corticosteroids are commonly given for short periods to relieve immediate symptoms, along with other drugs that help to prevent the immune system from attacking the myelin. Glatiramer acetate is an immune modulator that assists relapsing remitting MS, and, according to a study in the *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery and Psychiatry*, interferon-beta injections can reduce the frequency of relapses and may help to delay disability.

Minimising risk

It is widely accepted that the risk of acquiring MS is associated with exposure to environmental factors in those who are genetically susceptible. Smoking is a consistent predictor of MS risk, particularly in those who already have established risk factors.

A new study published in *Neurology* shows that among those with high levels of the antibody to the Epstein-Barr virus (EBV), smokers were twice as likely to have MS as those who had never smoked. Infection with EBV is very common and is often linked to chronic

fatigue syndrome. After the initial infection, EBV usually remains dormant in the white blood cells of the body. The association between EBV and smoking may provide clues as to why certain individuals develop MS.

There is also conjecture that the routine hepatitis B vaccine may trigger an auto-immune response in those who are genetically susceptible. However, the question of a connection between vaccinations and autoimmune disorders is surrounded by controversy. As MS is a disease that runs in families, it makes sense to carefully weigh the risks against the benefits of receiving this routine vaccination when there is a family history of MS.

There is little doubt environmental toxins wreak havoc on brain health. Most toxins are long-acting, fat soluble, and accumulate in the brain. A team of scientists in Norway recently analysed the health of more than 57,000 workers covering a 16-year period. They concluded that certain workers, such as painters who were routinely exposed to chemicals like organic solvents, had a significantly greater incidence of MS.

The food factor

Food intolerances are another common finding in MS. Food sensitivities cause an increased state of reactivity that leads to a detrimental immune response. The past century has brought about tremendous changes in our food supply. Our distant ancestors did not consume vast amounts of grains, dairy products, processed foods and chemical food additives. Nor did they suffer from most of the current lifestyle diseases, including MS, which are now common in Western societies. Identifying and eliminating trigger foods should be based on your unique symptoms.

Professor George Jelinek is the author of *Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis*.

Exposure to heavy metals, such as mercury, seems to play a role in the development of this disease.

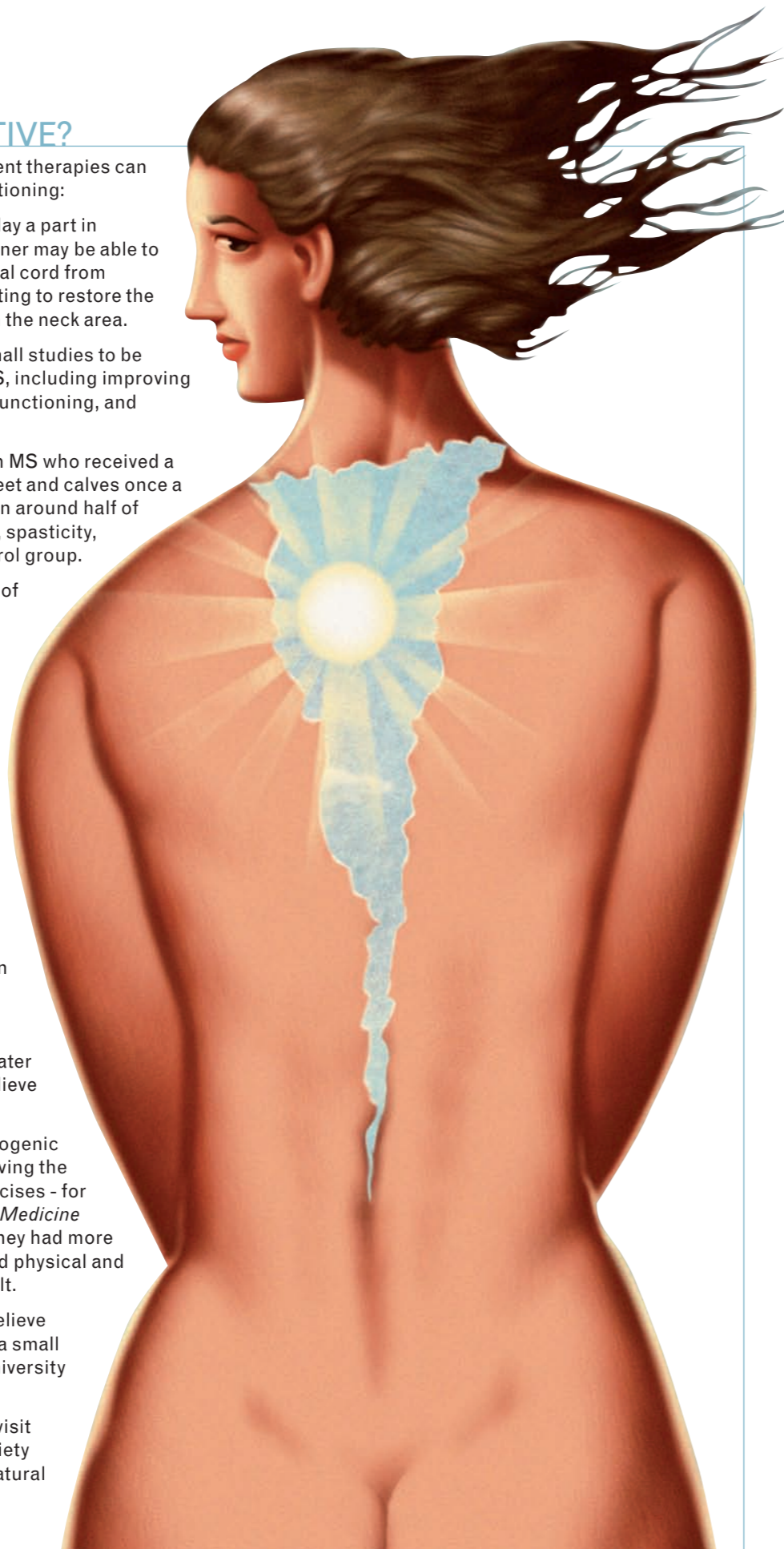


WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE?

These bodywork, relaxation, and movement therapies can help to ease symptoms and improve functioning:

- **Chiropractic** Spinal restrictions may play a part in worsening symptoms of MS. A practitioner may be able to prevent mechanical stresses of the spinal cord from intensifying symptoms of MS by attempting to restore the normal curves of the spine, especially in the neck area.
- **Massage** has been shown in several small studies to be helpful in treating various aspects of MS, including improving mental outlook, body image and social functioning, and reducing tension and fatigue.
- **Reflexology** In one study, patients with MS who received a one-hour reflexology treatment on the feet and calves once a week experienced some improvements in around half of their symptoms, including coordination, spasticity, and urinary control, compared to a control group.
- **Tai chi** There has not been a great deal of scientific research into the use of this gentle flowing exercise method to ease MS, but there are many anecdotal case reports suggesting that it can help improve balance and muscle spasms, as well as boost wellbeing and mood.
- **Music therapy** was shown to lead to a notable reduction in anxiety and depression and an increase in self-esteem and better body-image in a trial of 20 patients published in the *Journal of Music Therapy*.
- **Feldenkrais method** Awareness Through Movement and Functional Integration – a series of group lessons in which Feldenkrais practitioners guide a class in a slow-motion sequence of everyday movements – may help people with multiple sclerosis to move with greater steadiness and comfort, as well as to relieve depression.
- **Hypnotherapy** A small program of autogenic training – a self-relaxation method involving the use of visualisations and breathing exercises - for people with MS reported in *Behavioural Medicine* showed that, after 10 weekly sessions, they had more energy than the control group, and found physical and emotional challenges a little less difficult.
- **Yoga** Regular yoga practice helped to relieve fatigue in people with MS, according to a small study from Oregon Health & Science University published in *Neurology*.

To find a qualified practitioner near you, visit The Australian Traditional Medicine Society (www.atms.com.au) or The Australian Natural Therapists Association (www.australian-naturaltherapistsassociation.com.au).



An Evidence Based Guide To Recovery (Allen & Unwin, 2010). His research is a breakthrough in overcoming MS, demonstrating that people with MS who modify their diet, exercise habits and other aspects of their life can stabilise the illness, and potentially recover. Jelinek's experience with his mother's death from MS, and his own eventual diagnosis in 1999 lent an urgency and compassion to his research, which offers real hope for people diagnosed with this disease. Here are his top recommendations:

1. Lose unhealthy fats.

Studies have repeatedly established a direct relationship between the risk of MS and saturated fat intake, found principally in meat, chicken, dairy products, coconut oil, palm oil, and convenience foods. The best documented success with a low fat approach is from Dr Roy Swank. Swank revealed those individuals who consumed a low fat diet over many years had far less disease progression and greater survival than those who ate a high fat diet. Trans-fats, or human-made fats, are implicated in a wide range of Western diseases such as cancer, heart disease and immune dysfunction. These should also be avoided.

2. Choose healthier options.

Conversely, there is a definite link between omega-3 fats and a lower risk of MS. Dietary supplementation of the

BREAKING NEWS

Low maternal exposure to sunlight during the first trimester of pregnancy may increase the risk of offspring later developing MS, suggests a new Australian study published in the *British Medical Journal*.

For this study, researchers gathered information on individuals born in Australia from 1920 to 1950 who developed MS later in life. Low vitamin D levels were linked to a higher risk of MS. These results mirror previous research in the northern hemisphere where MS prevalence was higher in those born in the winter months.

This study highlights the importance of adequate vitamin D levels prior to conception as this vital nutrient assists healthy immune and nervous system development in the early stages of pregnancy. The 25-hydroxy vitamin D test remains the most accurate measure of your vitamin D status. Ask your doctor to arrange for you to have a test.

marine-based omega-3 fatty acids has been shown to reduce both the risk of autoimmunity and nervous system degeneration. Significant amounts

Food allergies, intolerances and sensitivities - which all lead to a flawed immune response - are also a common finding in MS patients.

of these good fats are found in oily fish and fish oil supplements. A good quality fish oil supplement features a high ratio of the omega-3 fatty acids eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) and docosahexaenoic acid (DHA). For vegetarians, these good fats can be sourced from cold-pressed flaxseed oil.

3. See green.

Scientists now propose a whole-food plant-based diet together with fish oil and vitamin D supplementation may help prevent the onset of MS in susceptible people. Recovery from MS is assisted by choosing a diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, leafy greens, whole grains and legumes. A plant-based diet is also a rich source of protective phytonutrients and fibre.

4. Let the sunshine in.

A consistent body of scientific evidence reveals countries with lower levels of sunshine have significantly increased incidences of MS. Sunlight stimulates production of vitamin D, and research suggests a possible influence of the 'sunshine vitamin' on the prevalence of MS as well as activity of the disease. Vitamin D plays a critical role in immune health, exerting potent anti-inflammatory and immune-modulating

NEED MORE INFO?

MS Australia
www.msaustralia.org.au/

Overcoming Multiple Sclerosis
www.overcomingmultiplesclerosis.org/

The Gawler Foundation
www.gawler.org/

activity. Sun exposure is by far the most efficient way of getting vitamin D: 10-15 minutes of sun three to five times a week promotes optimal health.

5. Chill out.

Nervous tension zaps vitality and the busier you are, the more important it is to allow time to relax and bring focus to your life. Try 30 minutes of daily meditation to create calm and allow your mind to rest. Limit tea, coffee, soft drinks and caffeine as these over stimulate the nervous system.

6. Get moving.

A healthy diet should go hand in hand with regular physical exercise, such as walking, swimming, riding a stationary bicycle, Pilates or yoga. Exercise improves muscle strength, balance and cardiovascular health. Plus, outdoor activities increase your exposure to sunlight.

References available on request.



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