Multiple Sclerosis and Wellness

Wellness means different things to different people. At the Mellen Center, we include all of the following topics in the wellness category:

- Avoiding behaviors that have a negative impact on health
- Having a health maintenance management plan
- Following a diet that promotes health
- Engaging in activities that promote health
- Performing other activities that improve wellness and wellbeing
- Exploring complementary and alternative medicine strategies

**Avoiding behaviors that have a negative impact on health**
Recent research at the Mellen Center has shown that smoking is not only bad for people with MS, but also seems to hasten the progression of the disease. We strongly urge those who are still smoking to stop as soon as they can. Cleveland Clinic has a smoking cessation program which is available to anyone and which has about a 60% success rate. Please see: http://my.clevelandclinic.org/psychiatry/services/smoking_cessation.aspx

People with MS have more problems tolerating excess alcohol or drugs than people who have no health problems. People with MS may also have medicines that interact with alcohol in a negative way. Making sure that you are controlling your habits is part of the key to taking care of your MS and the rest of your system.

**Having a health maintenance management plan**
People with MS often get so caught up in treating their MS that they neglect other aspects of their health care. Recent studies have shown that poorly controlled diabetes and high blood pressure have a negative impact on MS, not to mention their effect on other health issues. People with MS need regular health maintenance visits just like everyone else. People with MS have a higher likelihood to have osteoporosis (thinning of the bones) and should at some point be checked for this.

Part of staying well is managing the simple things like blood pressure, health checkups, immunizations, dental care, and routine maintenance activities such as Pap smears, mammograms, and prostate examinations. This is true for everyone.

**Following a diet that promotes health**
If you look on the Internet, there are many claims about diet and MS. However none of these claims are substantiated. No one really knows if diet has an impact on MS or not. At the Mellen Center, we recommend a heart-healthy diet, one with low amounts of red meat, lots of fruit and vegetables, and fewer carbohydrates and fatty foods. Severe diets such as the Swank diet...
are really unproven and in most cases very difficult to continue over the long term. There are no specific foods that we recommend. If you have problems with being overweight, we do recommend looking at reasonable ways to lose weight. Extra weight negatively affects balance and strength, increasing the risk of falling. Extra weight may also make high blood pressure and diabetes worse.

Engaging in activities that promote health
At the Mellen Center, we feel that staying active is very important. We do recommend an exercise program if at all possible. There are no specific programs. Walking, swimming, and running, using a stationary bicycle—these are all examples of aerobic activities and are all good. Some kind of ‘resistance’ program—for example, using light weights—may be helpful for building up muscle. A regular exercise program has been shown to improve fatigue, decrease depression, and improve overall feelings of wellness in people with MS.

Performing other activities that improve wellness and wellbeing
You might consider activities such as yoga, tai chi, or simple relaxation exercises. These all are good to reduce stress and improve the perception of wellness.

We encourage participation in any hobbies or activities that you love to do. Gardening, collecting stamps, playing cards—there are many activities which promote wellness. For example, therapeutic horseback riding (“hippotherapy”) has been shown to improve balance and a sense of wellbeing.

Exploring complementary and alternative medicine strategies
At the Mellen Center, we do not have specific recommendations about these strategies. This is because there are few well-designed studies of many of these strategies in the medical literature to guide our recommendations. We believe that whatever strategies are used should be shared with your Mellen Center team to make sure there is no specific contraindication to this approach.

We suggest that you set a goal and a time limit with any complementary/alternative approaches, just like you would with a symptom management medicine. For example, try the approach for 3 months with a goal of having more energy, or more endurance, or less spasm, or so on. See if you meet your goal; if not, consider stopping this approach.