Multiple Sclerosis and Exercise

For years, patients with multiple sclerosis (MS) were told to avoid exercise. It is unclear how this came about, but it may be related to the fact that some people with MS are heat-sensitive. When they are exposed to heat, they may see an increase in symptoms, including weakness, numbness, and fatigue.

In addition, there are rare reports of people with MS becoming very ill or dying when out sunbathing or taking a hot bath. These reports basically occur when a person with MS becomes so tired that they cannot leave the place they are and therefore become more and more overheated until they develop heat stroke. Fortunately, such cases are rare and only a handful of such cases have been reported in the history of MS.

So, does exercise have a role in MS?
From the results of a review of the literature published in 2005, the answer to this question seems to be a definite yes. This review was a systematic search of all of the literature on exercise and MS. The search found nine studies of exercise, of which 6 compared an exercise group to a no exercise group.

In all of these comparative studies, the people with exercise programs did better in terms of muscle function, mobility, and did not show a worsening of fatigue. Indeed, in some studies, patients felt they had less fatigue and felt more self-confident when they were in a regular exercise program. There appeared to be no negative effects of exercise in the patients studied.

Regular exercise does a few good things. The following are all pluses derived from a regular exercise program:

- Improved muscle strength, which makes function better
- Improved overall fitness, which is something that most of us benefit from
- Improved mobility
- Improved flexibility
- An increased sense of self-empowerment

Are there any specific programs for MS patients?
When the authors of the literature review studied the literature, they did not find any specific exercise program to be particularly beneficial. Probably the best solution involves a combination of cardiovascular exercise and resistance exercise. Examples of cardiovascular exercise include swimming, walking, bicycling, using a stationary bicycle or treadmill and so on. Examples of resistance exercise includes isometrics and using weights. Exercising 40 minutes three times a week can significantly improve fitness if this schedule is followed on a regular basis.
Should people with MS take any special precautions when exercising?
Precautions for people with MS who exercise are basically to avoid overheating and to make sure that you are safe using the exercise equipment. We recommend making sure you are not overdressed for exercise.

Also, it may be beneficial to drink a slush consistency drink during exercise as this reduces core body temperature very effectively. Make sure you have appropriate training and assistance on the equipment that you use and make sure you are safe at the end of your exercise program.