

## March is Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Awareness Month

March is dedicated to raising awareness about MS. Multiple Sclerosis (MS) is a progressive, lifelong illness that affects nerve cells in the brain and spinal cord when the body's own immune cells attack the layer of tissue, called myelin, that surrounds and protects the nerves and normally protects nerve cells. In MS, myelin becomes damaged or inflamed, interrupts nerve signals and causes symptoms. People can have only one mild symptom, very few symptoms or many symptoms with severe disability. MS is more common in women than men.

Symptoms of MS can come and go in episodes or attacks and vary depending on which parts to the brain or spinal cord are involved. Some symptoms may include:

- Sudden vision loss or blurry vision
- Clumsiness
- Slurred speech
- Tiredness
- Muscle weakness
- Trouble walking
- Loss of bladder control

The rehabilitation team consisting of physical, occupational, and speech therapies, plays a crucial in managing Multiple Sclerosis.

Specifically, physical therapy helps individuals maintain mobility, improve muscle strength and endurance, enhance balance and coordination, reduce fatigue, manage pain, and adapt to changing physical abilities throughout the course of the disease, allowing them to live as active and independent lives as possible. Essentially, physical therapy aims to mitigate the physical limitations caused by MS and improve overall quality of life.

Key aspects of physical therapy for MS may include:

- Exercises designed to build muscle strength, especially in areas affected by weakness due to MS, to support mobility and daily activities.
- Improving walking patterns and gait stability through specific exercises to address balance and coordination issues.
- Targeted exercises to enhance balance and prevent falls, which can be a significant concern for people with MS.
- Stretching exercises to maintain flexibility and prevent muscle spasms, which can be common in people with MS.
- Instruction on using assistive devices like canes, walkers, or wheelchairs when necessary to support mobility.

Occupational therapy for focuses on helping individuals maintain independence in their daily activities by addressing challenges like fatigue, muscle weakness, cognitive difficulties, and impaired coordination, allowing them to participate fully in self-care, work, and leisure activities through adaptations, energy conservation techniques, and assistive devices, ultimately improving their quality of life.

Key aspects of occupational therapy for MS may include:

- Evaluating difficulties with tasks like bathing, dressing, eating, cooking, and managing personal hygiene to identify areas needing support.
- Teaching strategies to conserve energy, pacing activities, prioritizing tasks, and managing the impact of fatigue on daily life.
- Providing and training on assistive devices like reachers, button hooks, shower chairs, raised toilet seats, and specialized utensils to facilitate daily tasks.
- Addressing cognitive impairments like memory problems, attention difficulties, and executive functioning challenges through cognitive training exercises.
- Suggesting changes to the home environment to promote accessibility and safety, including grab bars, ramps, and lighting adjustments.
- Providing information and strategies for managing MS symptoms, coping with challenges, and promoting self-advocacy.

Finally, speech therapy plays a crucial role in managing communication difficulties experienced by individuals with MS by addressing speech problems like slurring, slow speech, difficulty with word retrieval, and swallowing issues, helping individuals improve their speech clarity, articulation, and overall communication ability through targeted exercises and strategies tailored to their specific needs.

Key aspects of speech therapy for MS may include:

- Exercises to strengthen the muscles involved in speech production, including tongue, lips, and throat muscles, to improve articulation and voice quality.
- Strategies like slowing down speech, over-articulating sounds, and using pauses to enhance intelligibility.
- Managing breathing patterns to support longer utterances and improve voice projection.
- Addressing cognitive difficulties related to communication, such as word finding challenges, by practicing memory and language processing skills.
- Managing swallowing difficulties (dysphagia) through techniques like dietary modifications, posture adjustments, and muscle exercises to prevent choking and aspiration.

March is a time to educate our seniors about the symptoms, treatment, and therapy support available for individuals living with MS.