

Your Health

 Health Partners

APRIL 2023
NEWSLETTER



MANAGING & REDUCING STRESS

Plus, articles on multiple sclerosis and nutrition

Our lives can sometimes feel increasingly stressful with employee burnout and performance anxiety awash in the media. Our team at Psych Health delve this month into what stress is, how it manifests in our bodies and brains and how we can be mindful of it and utilise techniques to minimise it. In addition, we look at multiple sclerosis for MS Awareness week and we end with an in-depth article on nutrition, portion size and gut health. Enjoy!

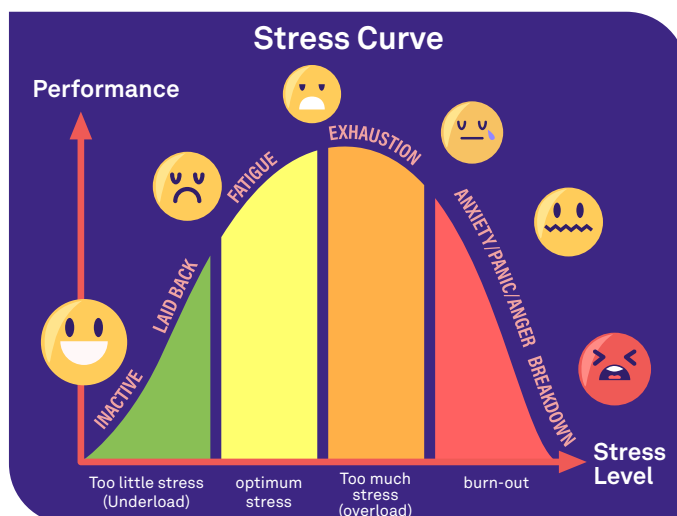
STRESS

Stress is the body's reaction to feeling under pressure or threat. We all experience stress to some degree – it can even be good (at manageable levels) and enable us to push harder, reach a deadline, make a difficult phone call, meet the demands of work, home and family life.

A low level of stress can increase energy, concentration and motivation, but too much stress can lead to negative reactions and can make us feel overwhelmed and stop us in our tracks.

Prolonged and significant stress can lead to serious health issues.

The stress curve illustrates this.



Too much stress can cause physical and psychological difficulties, such as:

Physical stress

- Headaches, fatigue, increased sensation of pain, palpitations (irregular heart beat), digestive symptoms;

Psychological stress

- Low mood, irritability, anxiety, sleep problems, tearful, appetite changes.

The 'stress bucket' (right) can help us to visualise our levels of stress, identify where stress is coming from and the measures we can use to help reduce and prevent it.

Above the bucket are the clouds – these detail the sources of stress. The stresses cause rain, which falls to fill up the bucket. The rain is released from the bucket (the holes at the bottom) by self-help and positive lifestyle activities, which lower the stress levels.



Things to consider

- Size of your bucket (the smaller your bucket, the more vulnerable you may be to stress)
- How full is it at any given time?
- Signs it is getting too full
- Are all your 'taps' to reduce stress working?
- Healthy and unhealthy ways of managing stress

TIP:

Be mindful of your diet and try to cut down on alcohol and smoking, replacing your junk food or drink with a brisk walk or bike ride.

Managing stress

Stress can lead to an increased consumption of alcohol and/or caffeine, smoking and junk food – substances that can provide a temporary sense of delight or relief. Whilst they might make you feel better in the short term, in the long term, they can become harmful and potentially addictive.

Physical activity can help with stress and have a positive effect on your mood and sleep patterns. Exercise can also help take your mind off your worries. The repetitive motions can help to focus on your body, rather than your mind, and by being mindful of your movements and surroundings, you experience many of the same benefits as meditation.

Enjoyable interests and hobbies can distract you from stressful situations and can help to carve out some 'me time'. Rest and relaxation is important in our busy lives. Shared hobbies can also be a good way to meet new people if you are feeling isolated.

TIP:

Aim for at least 150 minutes of exercise over the course of a week with different activities, even if you are starting out with a simple 20-minute walk.



TIP:
Think of hobbies or new activities you may not have yet tried but which might be enjoyable (go to your local library or look online for some inspiration; sign up for a walking club or a 'meetup' app).

TIP:
Be kind to yourself about what can be achieved and reward yourself for progress, however small.

Prioritising and planning your work and daily activities can help you to manage stress if you feel overloaded or overwhelmed, such as:

- Making a list of things to do in their order of importance;
- Setting small, achievable goals and building in flexibility.

Talking and support

Having a good support network can mean you have people to talk to and get advice and emotional support for stress. Support can come from a variety of sources – family and friends, work colleagues or managers and peer support.

Family and friends may be able to help you with some of the things that are causing stress; if they know how you're feeling, they could check in with you and act as a listening ear.

If the source of your stress is work-related, try discussing matters with your manager or

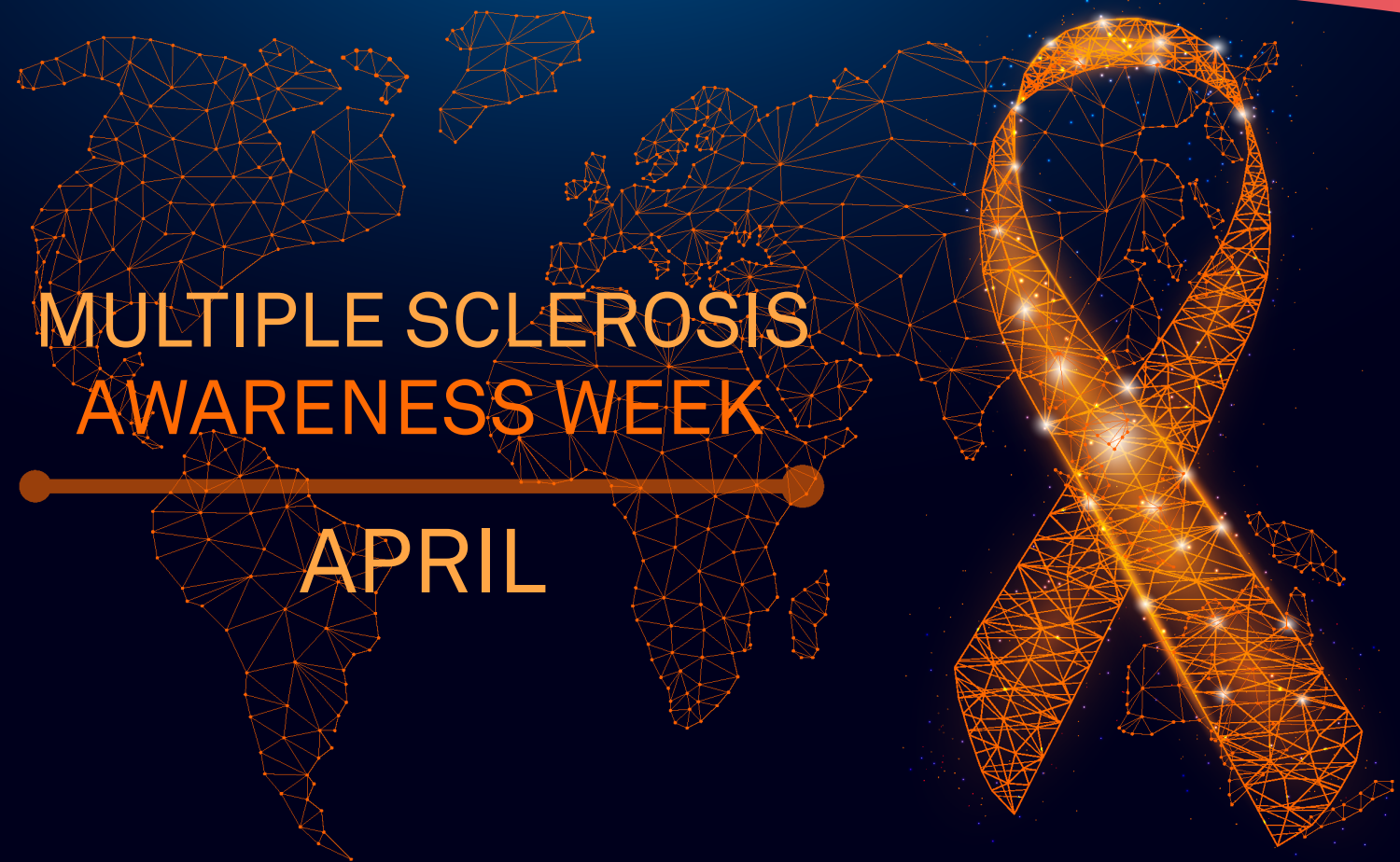
HR so they can help with a plan and look at ways to support you. Organisations may have Mental Health First Aiders or access to Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP).

Peer support comes from other people with similar issues and difficulties. It can be helpful to share experiences, and you may find it beneficial to connect with others, exchanging ideas about wellbeing and feeling less alone.

When to seek help

If stress is impacting on your psychological wellbeing and ability to do normal daily activities and you have tried self-help measures, it may be the right time to seek professional help from your GP or counsellor/therapist, if you have one.

If stress is causing you to experience physical symptoms or the worsening of a chronic medical condition, misuse of alcohol or drugs, do seek help from your GP.



MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a condition that can affect the brain and spinal cord, causing a wide range of potential symptoms, including problems with vision, arm or leg movement, sensation or balance.

It is a lifelong condition that can sometimes cause serious disability, although it can occasionally be mild. In many cases, it is possible to treat the symptoms.

MS is most commonly diagnosed in people in their 20s, 30s and 40s, although it can develop at any age. It's about two to three times more common in women than men and is one of the most common causes of disability in younger adults.

What causes MS?

MS is an autoimmune condition. This is when something goes wrong with the immune

system and it mistakenly attacks a healthy part of the body – in this case, the brain or spinal cord or central nervous system.

In MS, the immune system attacks the layer that surrounds and protects the nerves called the myelin sheath. This damages and scars the sheath and potentially the underlying nerves, meaning that messages travelling along the nerves become slowed or disrupted.

Exactly what causes the immune system to act in this way is unclear, but most experts think a combination of genetic and environmental factors is involved.

Types of MS

MS starts in one of two general ways: with individual relapses (attacks or exacerbations) or with gradual progression.

The main types of MS are as follows.

1. Relapsing remitting MS

About 85% of people with MS are diagnosed with the relapsing remitting type. These people will have episodes of new or worsening symptoms, known as relapses. Relapses typically worsen over a few days, last for days to weeks to months, then slowly improve over a similar time period.

Relapses often occur without warning but are sometimes associated with a period of illness or stress. The symptoms of a relapse may disappear altogether, with or without treatment, although some symptoms often persist, with repeated attacks happening over several years. Periods between attacks are known as periods of remission and can last for years at a time.

2. Secondary progressive MS

In this type of MS, symptoms gradually worsen over time without obvious attacks. Some people continue to have infrequent relapses during this stage. About two-thirds of people with relapsing remitting MS will develop secondary progressive MS.

3. Primary progressive MS

10-15% of people with the condition start their MS with a gradual worsening of symptoms. In primary progressive MS, symptoms gradually worsen and accumulate over several years and there are no periods of remission. However, people often have periods where their condition appears to stabilise.

Could I have MS?

The symptoms of MS vary widely from person to person and can affect any part of the body.

Depending on the type of MS you have, your symptoms may come and go in phases or get steadily worse over time. The symptoms often have many other causes, so they're not necessarily a sign of MS.

Speak to your GP if you are concerned and let them know about the specific pattern of



The main symptoms include:

- Fatigue;
- Difficulty walking;
- Vision problems, such as blurred vision;
- Problems controlling the bladder;
- Numbness or tingling in different parts of the body;
- Muscle stiffness and spasms;
- Problems with balance and co-ordination;
- Problems with thinking, learning and planning.

Find out more about symptoms here: www.mssociety.org.uk/about-ms/signs-and-symptoms.

symptoms you're experiencing. If they think you could have MS, you will be referred to a neurologist, who may suggest tests such as an MRI scan to check for features of MS.

Treatments for and living with MS

There is currently no cure for MS, but a number of treatments can help control the condition and ease symptoms.

The treatment you need will depend on the specific symptoms and difficulties you have and may include:

- Treating relapses with short courses of steroid medicine to speed up recovery;
- Specific treatments for individual MS symptoms;
- Treatment to reduce the number of relapses using medicines called disease-modifying therapies.

Disease-modifying therapies may also help to slow or reduce the overall worsening of disability in people with relapsing remitting MS, and in some people with primary and secondary progressive MS, who have relapses.

Unfortunately, there's currently no treatment that can slow the progress of primary progressive MS, or secondary progressive MS, where there are no relapses. Many therapies aiming to treat progressive MS are currently being researched.

MS can be a challenging condition to live with, but new treatments over the past 20 years have considerably improved the quality of life of people with the condition.

MS itself is rarely fatal, but complications may arise from severe MS, such as chest or bladder infections, or swallowing difficulties. The average life expectancy for people with MS is around five to ten years lower than

“There is currently no cure, but a number of treatments can help control the condition and ease symptoms.”

average and this gap appears to be getting smaller all the time.

More resources

- Exercises for MS symptoms: <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/care-and-support/everyday-living/staying-active/exercises-for-ms-symptoms>
- Healthy eating for those with MS: <https://mstrust.org.uk/life-ms/diet>
- For more support: <https://www.mssociety.org.uk/care-and-support/ms-helpline>

Sources: NHS, MS Society, MS Trust

GOOD NUTRITION

Eating a balanced diet provides the foundations for physical and mental health. Our bodies and minds need to receive the right fuel to perform at their best.

What does good nutrition look like?

The NHS's Eatwell Guide advises that to have a healthy, balanced diet, people should try to:

- Eat at least five portions of a variety of fruit and vegetables every day;
- Base meals on 25% protein, 25% complex carbohydrates and 50% fresh salad and vegetables;
- Have some dairy or dairy alternatives (such as soya drinks);
- Eat less meat /processed meat and replace with beans, pulses, fish, eggs and other protein;
- Choose unsaturated oils and spreads, and eat them in small amounts;
- Drink plenty of fluids, e.g. at least six to eight glasses a day.

If you're having foods and drinks that are high in fat, salt and sugar, have these less often and only in small amounts.

How much should we eat?

Portion sizes of many foods have increased significantly over the past two decades, especially food sold for immediate consumption, which often far exceeds recommended serving sizes.

Our perception of what a serving size should be has been altered by the increasing availability and marketing of larger food portions.

Larger portions are now offered all around us: restaurants, vending machines, superstores and fast food shops. Meal



combos or 'extra-value' meals have become increasingly popular – nearly all fast-food chains and most food stores offer options for more food at only a slight increase in cost, making it difficult to avoid or ignore.

Serving size matters because the portion of food you have directly affects **how** you eat. Research shows that people often eat the amount of food in front of them, consuming on average 30% more calories when their portions are supersized.

What does an ideal plate look like?

- Around half of your plate should consist of vegetables and fresh salad, ideally as colourful as you can get.
- One quarter should contain good-quality, lean protein, such as chicken, turkey, fish or tofu.
- The remaining quarter should contain complex carbohydrates, like brown rice or whole wheat pasta, and a small serving of healthy fats, such as olive oil.

What is one portion?

- One apple, banana, pear or similar-sized fruit
- One palm-sized piece of protein
- A tablespoon of dried fruit, such as raisins or cranberries


Healthy swaps

Try swapping your mid-morning biscuit for a banana, and add a side salad to your lunch (with no or minimal dressing).

Have a portion of vegetables with dinner and a piece of fresh fruit on its own or with plain, lower-fat yoghurt for dessert.

Once you get used to less sugar, you will find you crave it less and you don't need much to find something satisfyingly sweet.

Want to make sure you're eating more fruit and vegetables – without increasing your costs?

- Bring a shopping list to avoid impulse buys.
- Aim for loose fruit & vegetables – they can be cheaper, hold more nutrients and keep for longer. 

Tips for portion control

- Split an entrée/starter between two people.
- Take any leftovers away in a carry-out container.
- Divide contents of large packages into smaller containers.
- Low-calorie dense food can help make you feel satisfied.
- Keep excess food out of reach, preventing 'mindless' eating or snacking.
- If you feel hungry between meals to avoid overeating, drink water or herbal tea or have a piece of fruit.
- Try to avoid eating or snacking in front of the TV, as it is easy to overeat when your attention is focused on something else.
- Replace sweet jars with a fruit bowl.
- Put tempting foods out of sight and put healthy foods in easy-to-reach places.

Brain health is crucial to our overall health. It underlies our ability to communicate, make decisions, problem-solve and live a productive and useful life.

A nutritious diet is essential for boosting brain health. As well as supporting our brain function, certain food groups can also provide protection against many diseases, such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer.

Try to include some of the following in your diet every day:

- Green leafy vegetables;
- Berries;
- Omega 3-rich foods like flaxseeds, walnuts, oily fish and avocados;
- Whole grain food such as oats, brown/wild rice and spelt.



GUT HEALTH

Gut microbiome guru Tim Spector recommends eating 30 different plants each week: “The wider diversity of fibre-packed plants you eat, the happier and more diverse your gut microbiome will be”. If this is too difficult to do, try to increase your variety as much as you can.


Good, diverse sources of fibre include nuts, seeds, pulses, whole grains, fruits (especially berries) and vegetables (especially leafy, dark-green varieties), and they are packed with nutrients that support a healthy body.

Tim advises that not only are colourful plant foods rich in fibre, which helps maintain a healthy gut. Plant fibre can also be prebiotic, meaning they assist with the development of healthy gut bacteria and are rich in polyphenols, which ‘good’ gut microbes feed on (this is a good thing!). In addition, extra virgin olive oil and dark chocolate are both rich in antioxidants.

Try including small amounts of fermented foods, such as bio-live yogurts, kefir, kimchi,

kombucha and sauerkraut. They all contain probiotics (or ‘live’ microbes) which live in your gut and increase the number and variety of bacteria that comprise your microbiome.

Try to avoid eating too late at night to give your stomach time to digest and rest. Tim says: “At night, there is a whole team of gut microbes that work to clean up your gut lining and keep it healthy. This regular cleaning is important for supporting a healthy gut and immune system. By giving your gut bugs a break, they’ll have time to recover to do their job well.”

Limit your intake of ultra-processed foods. Not only are they not good for our bodies and brains, they are linked to ill health, including heart disease and type 2 diabetes. Ultra-processed foods tend to have very little fibre and they often have excess sugar, unhealthy fats and sweeteners added. Overconsumption of these additives may not contribute to optimal gut health. 

‘GOOD GUT’ GRANOLA

by Alli Stables, Head of Remote Case Management at Health Partners

INGREDIENTS

- 100g mixed raw seeds (pumpkins seeds are a great choice as they contain iron, magnesium and Omega 3s)
- 400g porridge oats (preferably jumbo organic plain oats, not instant or flavoured)
- 240g mixed raw nuts (walnuts pack an Omega 3 punch, Brazil nuts contain selenium which boosts thyroid health and supports the immune system, and almonds and pecans are both great, too).
- 2 tsp (heaped) cinnamon – you may also add other spices such as nutmeg or all spice if you fancy
- 1 TB vanilla extract – not the sweetened kind (you may add more of this if you like the flavour)
- 4 TB maple syrup or honey – you can reduce this if it is too sweet but try not to add more
- 1 ½ TB good-quality rapeseed or avocado oil or extra virgin olive oil

* Note that this recipe contains nuts and seeds – if you are allergic please omit them from the recipe.

METHOD

1. Preheat oven to 180c.
2. Mix all ingredients together until everything is combined and put into a roasting tin.
3. Bake in the oven for 30 minutes – stirring every 10 minutes to make sure it bakes evenly (especially moving the edges in).
4. Remove from oven after 30 minutes and let cool.
5. Let cool and store in an airtight container.
6. Serve with natural, bio-live yogurt or plain kefir and fresh fruit such as grated or chopped apple, kiwi, berries.

NEXT ISSUE:

- Mental Health Awareness
- Stroke / Hypertension
- Deaf Awareness

At Health Partners we offer a full range of tailored health and wellbeing services.

Our thinking is innovative. We constantly develop new responses and tools designed to address the health and wellbeing challenges that face your business and people.

Our commitment is total. We invest in our services, creating new ones and keeping in step with every client. We constantly explore new ways of working and make no compromises in the quality of our services.

Simply put, we are here to help people be their best.