

# [How to manage your MS while enjoying the spring](#)



## **4 tips for indoor and outdoor activities**

by Lisa Mulcahy

Spring has arrived. It's time to put away your winter things and do some spring cleaning, prepare the garden, and maybe get outside for some exercise and fresh air. The great news: you can do all of this while managing your multiple sclerosis and enjoy the new season to the fullest.

The key is to pace yourself properly. "I tell my MS patients that the mind and the energy reserve that they have is similar to a rechargeable battery," says Svetlana Primma Eckert, MD, assistant clinical professor of neurology at the University of Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences and a neurologist at Jacobs MS Center for Treatment and Research in Buffalo, New York. "If you use it all up too fast, your body will begin to work in 'low battery mode' or shut down completely. This can result in significant worsening of your symptoms and severe fatigue and is why mindfulness and awareness of your body and symptoms are very important."

Here's a look at ways you can manage your MS and make the most of your favorite springtime activities.

### **1. Focus on a slow but steady clean-up**

Your [spring to-do list](#) is a mile long. You're feeling super motivated to wash those windows, clean those closets, vacuum every square inch of your carpets and banish every dust bunny

you see. The thing is, if you attempt too much at once, you could wear yourself out. “MS lesions or plaques cause a ‘roadblock’ for the electrical impulses that send messages from one part of your brain to another,” Eckert explains. “Many other neurons need to be activated to go around this roadblock, which means you expend much more energy, even when you’re doing small tasks.”

A smart strategy: keep things simple. Rebecca Cunningham, assistant professor of clinical occupational therapy at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, offers the following advice:

- Spread your work out into small tasks and take care of them over a period of time, not all at once. Make a list to help you determine the order of your jobs that works best for you.
- Factor in rest. Structure a plan in which you’ll work for a set amount of time, then take a break. Or just do [one activity at a time](#), then take adequate time to relax — a nap is totally OK.

Staying seated can also help conserve energy. Marie Curtis, MS, an occupational therapist at UNC Health in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, says that sitting can reduce the amount of energy your body expends by 25%. Sorting and discarding clutter or tossing expired pantry goods from your chair allows you to accomplish plenty, too.



**Steve Guzman (right) lives in the San Diego area with his husband, Andres. They love pets and have dogs, cats, chickens and a piglet. Steve was diagnosed with MS in 2005.** Photo by Keith Carlsen

## 2. Garden smart

Tending to beautiful flowers or growing your own vegetables can be so rewarding. While your MS doesn't have to keep you from enjoying the [pleasures of gardening](#), consider these steps to avoid triggering symptoms:

- Ask a friend or family member to do the strenuous work for you, so you aren't lifting heavy plants, weeding or raking.
- Choose plants that don't require a lot of watering, so you don't need to carry a heavy hose around. An irrigation system or soaker hose eliminates even more unneeded effort.
- Use convenient, user-friendly gardening supplies, like a wheeled utility cart and ergonomically designed tools to take the pressure off your hands.

Choosing raised gardening beds, ideally 23 to 30 inches high, can be a big help if you use a wheelchair or scooter. Placing your beds at least 4 feet apart will allow you the best mobile access. A stable and sturdy gardening bench with a metal bar to help you get up is a great idea for sitting or kneeling as you garden, too.

## 3. Stay as cool as you can when exercising

If you love an outdoor workout, it's important to remember that springtime temperatures can get deceptively warm. [Exercise can be beneficial for people living with MS](#), but heat intolerance also is common. "Heat slows down electrical conduction, and in MS patients, this can worsen or bring on symptoms," Eckert says. "This worsening is temporary but can affect exercise endurance, so it's important to stop before overheating and take frequent breaks if necessary."

Hydration is therefore essential. "One of my recommendations for staying cool is drinking lots of cool water/ice water during the day," Eckert stresses. Aim to drink a glass of water with each meal, and refill a portable water bottle throughout your day.

"There are also many cooling products that you could try — simple, effective and low-cost tricks for staying cool, such as cooling vests and neck pillows," Eckert adds. "A cooling hat may be very helpful, since much of our heat exchange occurs through the head."

One of Eckert's patients also came up with a simple, effective trick to stay cool: "Put on a synthetic long-sleeve shirt and spray yourself periodically with a bottle of ice water. The evaporation of the water from your skin through the shirt can significantly cool your body and improve exercise endurance."

It's also vital to choose an exercise that is not going to cause you to overheat to the extreme.

Try whatever activity you love, such as walking, jogging, running, dancing, swimming or bicycling three times a week for 20 to 30 minutes or more. On especially hot or humid days, though, it's OK to skip a workout or do something low impact like yoga, stretching or chair

exercises. You could also try a fun stationary activity, like hula hooping. Working out when the day is coolest, like early in the morning or in the evening, is also a great option.

#### **4. Stay in the moment**

Once you've strategized smart ways to stay safe and active, savor the spring. Beautiful weather, fun times with friends and family — there's so much to enjoy about this lovely season, and it only comes around once a year.

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