

Walk MS offers more than ever



New 'Living with MS' area provides information, connections.

by **Kelsey Blackwell**

Whether newly diagnosed or living with multiple sclerosis for decades; walking for the first time or the umpteenth; or moving by foot or by wheel, Walk MS participants will now have even more ways to find connection, support and inspiration, thanks to the new Living with MS program, which will be available at each Walk MS location.

"We rolled the program out last year and it was very well received," says Kristin Gibbs, vice president, Walk MS, at the National MS Society. "By providing a place for people with MS to gather, it's a way to make connections naturally around experiences with MS and to share information."

What to expect

Walk MS is an annual fundraising and educational event series that attracts over 330,000 participants to more than 500 locations across the nation. The distance of the walk varies, though most cities offer 1- and 3-mile options, with each site offering at least one fully accessible route. Volunteers are on-site to provide information about MS and offer directions. For anyone living with MS and those who care about someone with the disease, Walk MS also provides an invaluable opportunity to connect and get involved.

And now, with dedicated space at each Walk MS event, Living with MS participants can meet each other and strike up conversations that could launch lifelong friendships. Program participants can also pick up special T-shirts—so they can more easily identify each other on

the Walk MS route or wherever they choose to wear it.

Connecting and learning

“I was kind of shy since 2016 was my first time participating,” says Karen Andrews, 54, who lives in Lancaster, Texas, and was diagnosed with MS in 2014. But, says Andrews, “A number of people—others living with MS, as well as family members and friends of people living with MS—came up to me during the Walk to talk to me, ask me questions and give me encouragement. It was like they just embraced me.”



Karen Andrews, who was diagnosed in 2014, with her family at her first Walk MS last year in Dallas. She enjoyed connecting with people in the Living with MS area after the walk. Photo courtesy of Karen Andrews

Andrews, like many others who have been recently diagnosed, found that Walk MS and, in particular, the Living with MS program, can be an entry point to the Society’s services and programs—and to connecting with others living with the disease.

“When I found out I have MS, one of the things that became difficult was talking to my family and my friends about it,” Andrews says. “I wanted to talk about it, but I didn’t want to burden someone who was not living with MS, so I closed up. I stopped talking.”

But when Andrews entered the Living with MS area after the Walk, she says, she connected with so many more people like herself. She learned about other programs, such as an online group for people with MS. “It’s amazing. I’ve got people all over the United States now that I’m connected to, and I can ask them all my questions,” she says.

Amy Martinez, 32, from Lockport, Illinois, says she appreciated the opportunities her children had last year to participate in experiential activities that helped them understand more about

what it's like to live with MS.

"That's where you try to do stuff wearing oven mitts, and things like that," to simulate various symptoms, such as fine motor challenges and numbness. "I really like that. I think it's a great way for people to understand the things that people with MS go through," says Martinez, who was diagnosed in 2005.

A fundraiser and more

The funds raised through Walk MS are used to fuel research, advocacy, services, awareness and more. The event has raised \$970 million to accelerate progress toward a world free of MS since it began in 1988.

For participants, raising money can certainly be motivating, but even more, it helps many feel supported in their desire to live their best lives.

"I'm not a recluse anymore because I was able to do that Walk," says Andrews. "I was able to see that it's OK to lean on other people. Since last year, I've been training. I'm hoping to be able to do at least two miles this year."

Martinez appreciates the opportunity to reconnect with her team members, who have been walking with her for eight years.

"My teammates are my family and friends. They come from all over—Ohio, Indiana—just to walk with me," she says. "We always have a cookout at my house afterward. It's kind of my way of saying, 'Hey, thanks for coming out.' "

Kelsey Blackwell is a freelance writer in Berkeley, California.

Visit [Walk MS](#) for more information or to register.

Thank you to Sanofi Genzyme, national sponsor of the Living Well With MS program.

