

Rosita Montoya

Many Ways

Adapted exercise boosts body and spirit

by Heather Boerner

Lori Holder-Webb thought her active life was over when her first MS attacks in 2006 left her unable to walk on her own. With panic, she imagined never doing the snowshoeing, Nordic skiing, or 20-mile bike rides she'd always enjoyed in her hometown of Madison, Wisconsin.

Then she found a three-wheel bike with a low-slung seat that restores the balance she lost to MS. It also restores something else: Her self-image.

"I've always been a really graceful, coordinated person," she said. "And here I was again—graceful. It was huge."

"One of the most difficult hurdles people face is, 'If I'm not doing it the way I used to—if I'm not bike riding, for instance, the way I used to—it's not really bike riding,'" said Brian Hutchinson, president and

CEO of the Heuga Center for MS, an organization that offers intensive programs to help individuals and families living with MS to transform and improve their quality of life.

"The key is to take an exercise you once enjoyed and adapt it to your new ability level," said Hutchinson. "It **is** bike riding, just in a modified way that allows you, in most cases, to experience the reason you enjoyed it in the first place."

These women share how they've made adapted exercise a regular part of their lives—gaining balance, strength, energy, and joy in the process.

Balance

Homa Fani relies on a walker to get around most of the time, but every morning, the 51-year-old Los Angeles resident flips herself upside down.

The word is in: exercise builds balance, strength, energy—and joy. The trip begins with attitude and willingness to experiment.

It's part of her daily yoga practice, which she does at home or at an MS-specific yoga class at nearby UCLA. She's practiced yoga since her diagnosis 20 years ago. These days, impaired balance, spasticity, and dragging legs have made walking increasingly difficult.

"When I was a girl, I lived for exercise," she said. "Now, walking is not pleasurable anymore. But I can take pleasure in yoga, because I can sit, lean on a chair or the wall, or lie down."

Fani does a form of yoga called adaptive Iyengar yoga, created for people with MS by Eric Small, a Los Angeles-based yogi who has MS and co-wrote **Yoga and Multiple Sclerosis: A Journey to Health and Healing** (Demos Medical Publishing, 2007) with Loren Martin Fishman, MD. People with MS need an instructor who can adapt poses to their

needs, ideally someone who has experience working with people with MS, Fani advises.

Once she learned modifications, Fani began doing yoga on her own at home. Even with slowly worsening symptoms, she can continue striking her favorite poses: a supported backbend, with a block under her sacrum, and an inversion, with her feet on the wall and her back on a bolster. These poses reduce spasticity in her legs, relieve her back pain, and boost her mood and energy.

Best of all is when she balances on her hands and feet in the downward-facing dog pose.

"When I do it, I feel like everyone else," she said. "I don't see my disability as much as in other poses. It's liberating."

to Move

Alexis Alexander plays adaptive tennis at the 5th Annual MS Field Day in New York City. More than 50 people participated in activities including hand-cycling (above, left), sit aerobics, yoga, and more.

Strength

Long before she was diagnosed with MS, Tara Lane, 35, learned what it was like to have the exercise she loved taken away from her. As a teenager, Lane was training for figure-skating competitions when doctors told her stress fractures in her legs had ended her career. Suddenly she went from practicing 30 hours a week to almost none at all. She fell into a depression.

She was determined to avoid a similar reaction when she received her MS diagnosis in 2000.

“I needed to be educated,” said Lane, of Edwards, Colorado. “I had to learn what I could and could not do, and how my body reacts now.”

Since she doesn't have many balance or vision problems, she's continued to figure skate, water ski, rollerblade, and practice yoga, as well as coach figure skating. She's found she doesn't have to worry about overheating making her symptoms worse because her favorite activities are water-cooled or cold-weather sports.

She's also learned that stress is a primary trigger for her symptoms, which include numbness and tingling, intense burning in her right leg, fatigue, and loss of arm strength. What's the best cure for her stress?

“Exercise!” she said.

Resources for adapted sports

A knowledgeable physical therapist will be the best guide to equipment that meets your needs and interests. But just a little Web surfing will unearth a world of possibilities to consider. Some good sites include ncpad.org (the Web site of the National Center on Physical Activity and Disability); newhorizons.org; abledata.com; disaboom.com; pointshop.com; and many more.



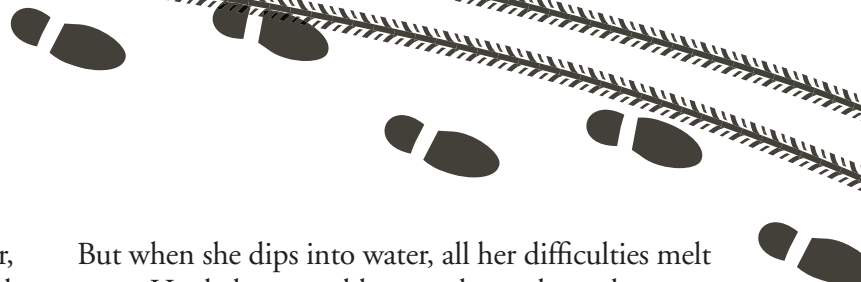
Donna M.
Gonzalez

Recently, Lane moved from Indianapolis to Colorado. She packed up the whole house herself (her husband had gone ahead and was already in Colorado) and she stayed with four different friends during the process. She was sure she was courting an MS relapse, so she was extra careful to eat well, sleep enough, take her medications—and ice skate.

“I got through all that and I was amazed; I didn't have a relapse,” she said.

Energy

Judi Staff admits she used to avoid swimming for fear of looking foolish in a bathing suit. But now, 14 years after being diagnosed with MS, the 56-year-old Staff deadpans, “I have far more problems than what I look like in a bathing suit.”



She gets in the water every chance she gets. For her, that usually means the spring and summer, when she can use a local outdoor pool. In the past, the Queens, New York, resident did step aerobics in her home every day. But in time, balance and fatigue problems made that impossible, so she joined an MS water therapy class. To her surprise, she fell in love with it.

Staff relies on a number of devices to help her get around: forearm crutches, a walker with a seat, a scooter, and a wheelchair, depending on the terrain and her energy level. She also has an assistance dog.

But when she dips into water, all her difficulties melt away. Her balance problems and muscle weakness disappear—and swimming doesn't exhaust her.

"In the pool no one sees me as being any different," she said. "There are always children I can help swim. It's a great outlet for me."

Joy

After Lori Holder-Webb discovered the three-wheeled trike, she couldn't be stopped. She tried snowshoeing and skiing and found she could easily

What MS experts say ...

When you're numb, exhausted, or dragging a leg, it's hard to fathom getting up and moving. Moreover, not everyone was a sports nut before MS arrived. In fact, a large number of us agree with the wag who said, "When I get the urge to exercise, I lie down until it goes away." But research suggests that exercise can do more than enhance overall health. It can actually reduce MS symptoms.

Not that long ago, medical schools taught that people with MS should **not** exercise. It's only been in the past 10 years that studies have shown exactly how workouts can help people with MS, according to Jodie Haselkorn, MD, MPH, director of the MS Center of Excellence West at the VA Puget Sound Health Care System in Seattle, Washington. Research indicates that exercise can decrease fatigue, improve walking speed and balance, and build endurance, strength, and cardiovascular health. It can also offset depression, anxiety, and anger. *

*If your health-care provider is not familiar with these findings, you may refer her/him to the Society's Expert Opinion papers in the Professional Resources section of our Web site at nationalmssociety.org/PRCPublications. Of particular interest: **Rehabilitation: Recommendations for Persons with Multiple Sclerosis** and **Management of MS-Related Fatigue**.

"We really do see an improvement from exercise across all domains," said Dr. Haselkorn. "The benefits for people with MS are the same as for people in the general population, but people with MS need it more."

And there are a few special benefits in MS. For example, some research has shown that exercise and medication together reduce spasticity more effectively than either treatment alone, according to Brian Hutchinson, PT, who is president and CEO of the Heuga Center for MS.

He and Dr. Haselkorn cited three big reasons to get moving:

- **Better general health.** By improving immunity and general well-being, exercise can help protect people from illnesses such as cardiovascular disease.
- **Improved performance.** Though for many people "improved performance" might mean a faster time running the 5K, for people with MS, "one can also think of it as better function: improved walking, strength, and other skills," Hutchinson explained.
- **Enhanced quality of life.** Exercise is energizing, so people can enjoy doing more. Simply put, "You are able to do daily activities more easily," Dr. Haselkorn said. —Heather Boerner

adapt these sports to her symptoms.

“It’s easier to walk on a pair of snowshoes than on my feet, because snowshoes are like having big, honkin’ feet,” she said. “I could do



Seated-yoga at MS Field Day in New York.

The Exercise Tip Sheet

- Check with your health-care provider before starting something new.
- Consult a physical therapist about what’s most effective and best for you.
- Create some personal incentives—rewards, social time, short-term goals, whatever works.
- And avoid these errors:

Not warming up: Muscles need time to adjust to new demands. Start slowly and increase intensity gradually.

Pushing yourself: Increase exercise time gradually. Doing a little every day is better than a blow-out once a week—so go for frequency.

Not drinking enough water: Don’t wait until you’re thirsty. Keep water at hand.

Not cooling down afterwards: Plan for rest time! If MS symptoms (especially prickling, numbness, or blurred vision) have increased, they may be heat-related. Use cool water on wrists, neck, and temples. And give yourself time to cool down.

Consuming energy bars or sports drinks: Unless you’re exercising for more than two hours, you don’t heed high-energy supplements. High energy is often a code word for high calorie!

it without a cane. I also found out that cross-country skiing is easier for me than walking, because it’s basically shuffling with four points of contact.”

She remembers vividly how she felt the first time she used adapted ski equipment. It was November 2006, she was 39, and “another crummy flare” had left her walking with crutches. She got the special ski poles and had a go.

“I’m not going to say I felt unimpaired, but I was feeling significantly less impaired than I did on crutches,” she said. “I got on the skis and I cried and skied for 40 minutes. I was so happy I could move again.”

However, she points out that exercise with MS means a change in thinking: Instead of a 20-mile bike ride, she must stop herself after seven miles or risk days of incapacitation. Likewise, on the ski trails, she limits herself to an hour and a half. But it’s worth it.

“If I don’t get out and exercise, I get so cranky and irritable,” she said. “So I’m not going 20 miles, but it still makes a big difference for me. I still get those great, juicy brain chemicals going.” ■

Heather Boerner is a Washington, DC- based reporter.