

## EXERCISE

# Yoga Moves MS has offered healing through movement for decades throughout southeast Michigan

By Susan Thwing  
For MediaNews Group

For the past 20 years, Mindy Eisenberg has dedicated herself to a mission of healing, empowerment and community through yoga.

As the founder and director of Yoga Moves MS, a nonprofit organization based in southeast Michigan, Eisenberg has pioneered the use of adaptive yoga to improve the lives of individuals living with Multiple Sclerosis (MS), Parkinson's disease and other neuromuscular conditions.

This fall, Yoga Moves MS celebrated its 20th anniversary — a milestone that reflects thousands of lives positively impacted by her selfless work.

Eisenberg's commitment to helping those with chronic illnesses has deep roots. Growing up, she witnessed the debilitating effects of MS firsthand as her mother battled the progressive form of the disease.

"Back then, they told people with MS not to move at all; it was believed movement would make things worse," Eisenberg said. Reflecting on her mother's struggles, she added: "There was nothing. Just Valium and steroids. Movement as therapy wasn't even a consideration."

Her experiences inspired Eisenberg's path toward health care administration and, eventually, yoga therapy. A lifelong lover of movement, she transitioned from practicing fast-paced hot yoga to training as a yoga therapist in her 40s, finding her true calling in adaptive yoga.

"Yoga therapy is more involved," she said. "It's about addressing specific health



PHOTO COURTESY OF MINDY EISENBERG

Mindy Eisenberg, left, Paul Nicholson, teacher Marcia Williams and Nicki Nicholson practice yoga.

and wellness needs."

Eisenberg's journey to creating Yoga Moves MS began with a small volunteer effort.

"Someone asked me to

teach a yoga class for the MS Society. I didn't know what I was doing, but I agreed. It didn't take long to see the benefits people were experiencing," she

said.

A year later, she started working with a local support group at the Michigan Institute for Neurological Disorders in Farmington

Hills. From those humble beginnings, Yoga Moves MS has grown into a thriving community with over 70 students participating weekly in its small-group

classes.

Unlike traditional yoga classes, Yoga Moves MS sessions are carefully tailored to the needs of individuals with neuromuscular conditions. Classes often require multiple instructors to provide personalized attention and ensure students' safety.

"Our (in-person) classes are small — 12 to 14 participants max — and focus on alignment and individual needs. This is not about just breathing into your body; we are hands-on to ensure everyone is safe and empowered," she said.

The impact of her approach goes beyond the physical.

"If you ask people what they value most, they'll often tell you it's the sense of community. It mitigates the isolation so many feel," Eisenberg said, adding that students check in on each other outside of class, forming bonds that resemble a close-knit family.

Yoga Moves MS has seen transformative results over the years.

"One of our students, who has little to no movement from the waist down, stood up using a chair for support during class. It was something he hadn't done in years. He told me yoga motivated him to try," she said.

As many participants have attested, the physical benefits extend to improved flexibility, reduced spasticity, and better sleep quality.

"We hear it all the time — students feel better, they sleep better, and they approach life with more positivity," Eisenberg said.

Running Yoga Moves MS is no small feat.

Adaptive yoga requires significant resources, with



PHOTO COURTESY OF MINDY EISENBERG

Mindy Eisenberg, founder and director of Yoga Moves MS, assists Mark Wegner, with Pauline and Owen Allen in the background.

some classes necessitating up to five instructors. Despite the high costs, Eisenberg remains committed to keeping classes accessible.

“There’s no set charge for our classes. We appreciate donations, but they’re complimentary. Many people with MS are financially struggling because the disease often strikes during their prime earning years,” she said.

To sustain its mission, Yoga Moves MS relies on fundraisers like the annual

Gratitude Gala and grants from organizations such as the Kirk Gibson Foundation for Parkinson’s. These efforts have allowed the nonprofit to expand its reach, including launching the Yoga Moves for Parkinson’s program and an on-demand adaptive yoga platform.

As Yoga Moves MS enters its third decade, Eisenberg is spearheading a rebranding effort to emphasize inclusivity. The new motto, “Yoga Moves Any Body,” reflects a broader mission to

welcome anyone seeking the benefits of adaptive yoga.

“There’s still so much misunderstanding about yoga,” Eisenberg said. “People think you have to be flexible to do it, but that’s not true. Yoga is about strength, mindfulness, and meeting your body where it is.”

Growing acceptance within the medical community supports Eisenberg’s vision.

“When I first started, yoga therapy was almost unheard of. Now, many

doctors actively encourage movement and recommend our classes to their patients. It makes their lives easier, knowing their patients are in good hands,” she said.

Dr. Robert Pace, director of neuroimmunology at Memorial Healthcare Institute for Neuroscience in Owosso, agrees.

“Yoga Moves MS makes my job easier. I enthusiastically endorse the organization and regularly recommend my patients to seek out their yoga classes for

pain management and flexibility,” he said.

Yoga Moves MS also will be available at the Kirk Gibson Center for Parkinson’s Wellness, a facility widely accessible to the Parkinson’s community. The center, set to open on Northwestern Highway in 2025, will offer a wide range of therapeutic programs free of charge, ranging from exercise and movement-based therapies to lifestyle classes and counseling services.

Reflecting on her jour-

ney, Eisenberg said: “My goal has always been to empower people and reduce fear. Yoga can change lives, and I’m grateful to be part of that change.”

In-person classes are held in various communities around the region, including Farmington Hills, Southfield and Troy. Live online classes also are available. Instructors, who undergo extensive training, are always needed. For more information, visit [yogamovesms.org](http://yogamovesms.org).

## HEALTH

# How can I lower my risk of developing Parkinson's disease?

By Dr. Trisha Pasricha

Special to *The Washington Post*

Is there anything I can do to lower my risk of developing Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease affects over 8.5 million people globally and is rising at an alarming rate: By 2030, the prevalence in many countries will have doubled from what it was in 2005.

There is still a lot we don't know about how Parkinson's disease develops. But as a physician-scientist who studies the disease's origins, I regularly recommend one promising intervention to my patients: aerobic exercise. Even one hour per week of moderate to vigorous exercise — such as tennis, biking, swimming or jogging — has been shown to make a significant difference.

I know. "Exercise more" can feel like such clichéd advice coming from a doctor. But exercise is one of the best-studied interventions in Parkinson's disease. It's been shown to both lower the risk of developing Parkinson's disease entirely, as well as to delay disease progression among people already diagnosed. That's a huge deal: If you think about it, there are very few drugs that do both of those things for any disease.

Looking for where and how to begin a new exercise habit? The key is finding exercises you actually enjoy. Hate jogging on the treadmill? Try aqua-jogging or exploring an outdoor trail near you.

Exercise regimens that help improve balance, such as dancing or boxing, can be great for people at higher risk of falls. Speak with your physician about the most appropriate regi-



GINA JOSEPH — MEDIATEWS GROUP

Kirk Gibson, right, who played Major League Baseball for 17 years, a career that included home runs that clinched a victory for the 1984 World Series Detroit Tigers and 1988 World Series Los Angeles Dodgers, talks about the foundation he created to help people like himself diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Listening to Gibson is Steve Annear, the foundation's managing director.

men for your needs.

## Brain scans offer clues about the power of exercise

Many forms of exercise are beneficial to various aspects of our health, but to reduce Parkinson's disease risk, studies have honed on some specifics. Light activity, such as walking or bowling, appear less protective. Most studies have found the greatest bene-

fit with moderate to vigorous physical activity.

But studies have found it actually doesn't have to be every day or even for very long. A 2010 study of over 200,000 people found that men and women in their 30s who engaged in one to three hours per week of moderate to vigorous exercise had a significantly lower risk of getting Parkinson's disease later in life (for men, by 17% and for women, by 39%). That risk de-

clined even further with more hours exercised each week. For seven or more hours, for example, men had a 30% reduced risk and women had a 53% reduced risk.

One reason exercise is so powerful is that it may be able to reverse the neurodegeneration seen in patients with Parkinson's disease. For instance, a small study published earlier this year looking at brain scans of patients at an early stage of

the disease found that six months of regular intense exercise (reaching 80% of a person's age-appropriate maximum heart rate) appeared to improve the health and viability of the dopamine neurons in the brain.

The hallmark of Parkinson's disease is a misfolded protein in the body, called alpha-synuclein, that is implicated in the loss of dopamine neurons in the brain. When those dopamine neurons

are lost, people lose their ability to fully control their muscles, resulting in symptoms such as tremors and trouble walking.

## The quiet signs of Parkinson's disease

Doctors who treat patients with Parkinson's disease know that by the time someone is diagnosed, the underlying molecular processes driving symptoms have already been brewing in their bodies for decades.



PHOTO COURTESY OF METRO EDITORIAL SERVICES

Health professionals look over a patient's brain scan.

In other words, when we diagnose people with Parkinson's, we're already late. It is much harder to slow down the disease in someone who has few dopamine-producing neurons left in the brain than it would have been had we intervened earlier.

Those decades before classic symptoms of Parkinson's show up — when we suspect the disease is quietly

working its way through the body — are known as the “prodromal” period.

When I say quietly, sometimes it's actually not so quiet — we just don't always recognize it for what it is. People with prodromal Parkinson's disease often do have symptoms, but not the “classic” ones we think of as associated with the disease.

These prodromal symptoms include loss of the

ability to smell, constipation and excessive daytime sleepiness — and they can be present for years. Trouble swallowing, chronic nausea and irritable bowel syndrome also predict future development of Parkinson's disease.

To be clear, any one of these signs isn't a definite marker of disease (I mean, who here isn't a little constipated from time

to time?). But if your parent had Parkinson's disease, you've lost your sense of smell, and you've had worsening constipation over the last few years — well, then you would have my attention.

If you're concerned, speak with your healthcare provider — and potentially a neurologist — to further assess your risk, which is based on many

additional factors such as your genetics (10% to 15% of Parkinson's cases have a genetic cause), environmental exposures and more.

### What I want my patients to know

In some cases, researchers believe Parkinson's disease may begin in the gut decades before it spreads to the brain. The data still isn't

quite at the stage where we can confidently say if reducing damage to the gut can lessen the likelihood of developing Parkinson's disease. However, taking steps to improve your gut's lining — like minimizing nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) use, limiting alcohol and avoiding ultra-processed foods — will only boost your gut health and overall well-being.