

Living with MND: How Physiotherapy Supports You at Every Stage

A practical guide for patients, families, and caregivers

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A diagnosis of Motor Neuron Disease changes everything and not just for the person diagnosed. For families and caregivers, it brings a wave of questions about what comes next, what can be done, and how to maintain the best possible quality of life. Physiotherapy cannot stop MND, but it plays a important role in helping people live well with it for as long as possible. This article explains how, and what you can expect at each stage.

What can physiotherapy actually do for MND?

Because MND progressively affects the motor neurons that control movement, the body's ability to move, balance, breathe, and perform everyday tasks gradually changes. Physiotherapy works alongside this progression (not against it) to preserve function, manage symptoms, and keep you as independent as possible for as long as possible.

At our foundation, physiotherapy for MND focuses on six core goals:

- Preserving strength and joint mobility for as long as possible
- Maintaining safe walking and balance to reduce fall risk
- Supporting breathing function through targeted respiratory techniques
- Managing pain, stiffness, and muscle spasms
- Teaching safe use of assistive devices as needs change
- Improving overall function and quality of daily life

“Physiotherapy for MND is not about pushing harder. It is about working smarter, matching the right intervention to the right stage, and always putting the patient's comfort and dignity first.”

What does a physiotherapy session involve?

Every person with MND experiences the condition differently depending on which motor neurons are affected and how quickly things progress. Your physiotherapy program is always tailored to you , there is no one-size-fits-all approach. That said, the following treatments are commonly used:

Stretching and range of motion exercises

Gentle, guided movements through the full range of each joint prevent stiffness and maintain flexibility. These are especially important for joints that are used less frequently as muscle weakness progresses. Done regularly, they significantly reduce the discomfort of spasticity and joint tightening.

Strengthening exercises

Where muscles retain some voluntary function, carefully graded strengthening exercises help maintain them. Resistance bands or light weights may be used, but the key principle is always the same: the exercise should feel manageable, never exhausting. Overworking weakened muscles can accelerate fatigue and is something your physiotherapist will monitor closely.

Breathing exercises

As MND can affect the muscles involved in breathing, respiratory physiotherapy becomes increasingly important over time. Techniques to improve lung capacity, clear secretions, and support breathing efficiency are introduced progressively. Your physiotherapist will also guide you and your caregivers in using breathing support devices such as BiPAP machines when the time comes, so that transition feels less daunting.

Balance and gait training

Falls are one of the most significant risks for people with MND. Balance exercises, walking practice, and gait retraining are used to keep you moving safely for as long as possible. As needs change, your physiotherapist will advise on the right assistive device whether a walking stick, walker, or wheelchair and make sure you and your family know how to use it confidently.

Pain and spasticity management

Pain in MND is often underappreciated but very real. Heat or cold therapy, gentle massage, manual therapy techniques, and electrotherapy modalities such as TENS can all be used to manage muscle pain, cramps, and spasticity. Your physiotherapist will work with your wider medical team to make sure your pain management is addressed from every angle.

Fatigue management

Fatigue in MND is different from ordinary tiredness, it is neurological and does not resolve with rest alone. Energy conservation strategies, activity pacing, and identifying your best times of day for different tasks are all part of physiotherapy's role. Small adjustments to how you structure your day can make a meaningful difference to how much you are able to do.

Home exercise program: what you can do between sessions

Physiotherapy is most effective when it continues at home between clinic visits. The exercises recommended will always match your current level of muscle function. Below is a general guide to the three levels of home exercise commonly used in MND. Your physiotherapist will tell you which level is right for you and adjust this as things change.

Level 1 — For mild to moderate muscle weakness

At this stage, you can still move your limbs independently and work against gravity. The focus is on maintaining what you have.

- Active range of motion: Move your shoulders, wrists, hips, and ankles through their full circle of movement every day. This takes less than ten minutes and prevents joints from stiffening.
- Gentle aerobic activity: Short ten-minute walks on a flat surface, or light use of a stationary exercise bike at low resistance. The goal is circulation and general conditioning, not fitness training.

- Sit-to-stand practice: Rising from a sturdy chair and sitting back down slowly. This preserves thigh strength and keeps everyday transfers from bed, sofa, toilet and stay safe and independent for longer.

Level 2 — For moderate to severe weakness

At this stage, you can start a movement but may not have the strength to complete it safely alone. A caregiver or family member assists, making these exercises safe and still beneficial.

- Towel-assisted arm lifts: A towel or strap held in the stronger hand gently supports and guides the weaker arm upward through a comfortable stretch.
- Tabletop sliding: Resting a weak arm on a smooth surface and sliding it gently forward or sideways removes the resistance of gravity, allowing movement that would otherwise be impossible.
- Seated trunk rotations: Gentle upper body twists while sitting in a supported chair maintain spinal flexibility and core awareness without any fall risk.

Level 3 — For advanced muscle weakness

When voluntary movement becomes very limited, a caregiver moves the limbs gently on the patient's behalf. These passive movements are essential to prevent painful joint contractures and severe spasticity, even when active exercise is no longer possible.

- Calf and hamstring stretches: The leg is straightened and the foot gently guided upward to keep the heel cord from shortening and becoming painful.
- Hand and finger extensions: A closed hand is gently opened and the fingers carefully extended to prevent the fist from permanently clenching.
- Shoulder elevations: The arm is carefully lifted upward and outward while the elbow is supported, preventing the shoulder from freezing in a restricted position.

Important safety rules for home exercise

These rules apply at every level and should never be compromised:

- **Exercise should never cause physical pain or severe cramping. If a movement hurts, stop immediately and inform your physiotherapist at the next visit. No pain rule**
- **If you feel exhausted for more than 30 minutes after exercising, or feel noticeably weaker the following day, the program is too intense. Shorten it and let your physiotherapist know. Watch for fatigue**
- **All standing exercises should be performed next to a solid support a heavy countertop or sturdy rail. This is non-negotiable. Never exercise alone standing**
- **Ten minutes every day is far more valuable than an hour once a week. Little and often is the guiding principle in MND rehabilitation. Consistency over intensity**

When you should contact your physiotherapist?

Physiotherapy for MND is not a fixed program it evolves as you do. Contact your physiotherapist if you notice any of the following:

- A sudden or significant change in strength or movement ability

- New or worsening pain, spasms, or joint stiffness
- Increased difficulty with breathing or swallowing
- A fall, or feeling unsteady in situations that felt safe before
- You feel the current program is too easy or too hard

Early communication allows the program to be adjusted before a problem becomes a crisis. You do not need to wait for your scheduled appointment, please reach out whenever something changes.

“You are not alone in navigating this. Our physiotherapy team at Dr. Shyama Narang Foundation is here to support you, your family, and your caregivers at every step not just in the clinic, but in building the confidence to manage well at home too.”

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This article is intended for patient education purposes. Please consult your physiotherapist or treating physician before making changes to your care program.