

# Accelerated Cure Project for MS

July 2019



## Managing MS and Other Health Concerns

MS is a complex disease, in and of itself. In many cases it isn't always the only health problem those living with the disease have to manage. Other conditions (referred to as comorbidities) may occur either before or after an MS diagnosis. These secondary illnesses often complicate things further. Many people with MS rely solely on their neurologist for their care. While a neurologist is an expert in neurological conditions like MS, he or she may not be the ideal clinician to address other problems that frequently occur with the disease (for example, bladder issues). In this case, it may be best to have input from a urologist. Likewise, those struggling with depression may benefit most by seeing a psychologist or therapist. It's important to assemble a healthcare team with the appropriate specialists to manage the many facets of MS and any comorbidities one may have. These providers may change over time depending on individual care needs.



Comprehensive care, with many health professionals taking a team approach, is becoming the gold standard in MS care. The goal of comprehensive care is to focus on the whole person and provide the necessary healthcare services, as needed. Comprehensive care is not a "one time" assessment, but a series of ongoing evaluations and treatments over the life of the person with MS by their healthcare team. Each clinician contributes in a unique way to health management. Sometimes all professionals are within a single center, or one may see specialists in the community by referral. This approach establishes, continues and sustains care in a coordinated fashion. When other health conditions occur alongside MS, having team members who communicate with each other ultimately helps prioritize which comorbidities need to be addressed first, how best to treat them and, in the event treatments overlap, how to avoid duplicate medications/services.



The most important member of the healthcare team is the person with MS. Those living with the disease hold the ultimate responsibility of selecting the best specialists for their care, setting expectations, or goals, of therapy and following a treatment plan. Individuals know their own bodies best and often are the first to recognize when something doesn't feel "right." Communicating these changes and observations to one's providers can make a real difference in a person's medical care. Working with a diversified healthcare team and participating in healthcare decisions is essential to improving not just health outcomes, but also one's overall experience.

Neurologists are central to providing quality care for people with MS. Only a neurologist can give a definite diagnosis of MS, and is the best provider to help manage disease relapses, as well as any MS symptoms one may experience more regularly, such as weakness, tremor or cognitive changes. In addition to the neurologist, a number of other clinicians may also contribute to one's care. Nurses often play a universal role, educating people with MS and their families about the disease, coordinating care, providing support throughout treatment, and helping people access programs or services for which they may be eligible (among other things). One may include a number of different rehabilitation specialists on their healthcare team, for example, a [physiatrist](#), a [physical therapist](#), an [occupational therapist](#), or a [speech-language pathologist](#). People with MS may benefit from the expertise of a mental health specialist, such as a [psychologist](#), a [neuropsychologist](#), or a [social worker](#). A nutritionist or dietitian can assist with diet and weight management. Urologists can diagnose and treat urinary and kidney problems, as well as sexual dysfunction in men. A gynecologist is also an important member of the healthcare team, especially for women with MS considering pregnancy or with reproductive issues.

A primary care physician (PCP) is also essential to providing comprehensive MS care. While the above specialists generally focus on an individual's MS, the PCP usually focuses on the overall health and wellbeing of the person with MS and his or her family members. A PCP often plays a pivotal role in helping people with MS manage any other health conditions they may have. In addition to providing regular health screenings and immunizations, a primary care physician may assist with recommending a specialist with expertise in a certain area, or be a central point in care, coordinating services from multiple specialists. For those taking multiple medications, a primary care physician can help to ensure they are taken correctly, to avoid any dangerous drug interactions.



Secondary health conditions are generally treated the same way in people with MS as they are in the general population. For example, high blood pressure in MS is often treated with a low-salt diet, exercise, stress reduction and antihypertensive medication, if necessary. When comorbidities are treated alongside MS, doctors may take a more proactive approach to keep an individual's MS from progressing more rapidly. As a result, the threshold for treatment may be lower for certain conditions. For example, a "healthy" individual with borderline hypertension may be treated with exercise and a healthy diet, with medication added should the condition not

improve. However, if an individual with MS presented with that same blood pressure measurement, a physician might add an antihypertensive right away.

A number of general strategies may help people with MS work with their healthcare team. It's important to be as prepared as possible for doctor's appointments and communicate with providers. Some find it helpful to keep track of symptoms in a notebook, noting when they happen and how severe they are. Many people with MS automatically blame new or worsening symptoms on their MS, especially if the symptom is consistent with MS, like pain or weakness. However, new symptoms may be a side effect of medications or the first sign of a new



condition. If they appear, it's important for people with MS to consult with their PCP (or another member of their healthcare team). Having a prioritized list of questions to address at a given appointment can help people with MS and their physician use their time together efficiently by addressing their biggest worries first. When discussing MS and any concurrent illnesses with a provider, it's important to speak up, even about issues that are hard to discuss, and be as clear and concise as possible. Don't be afraid to ask for help understanding, or for more information. Providing an updated list of medications (including over-the-counter products and alternative medicines) to every provider on one's healthcare team, along with contact information for other providers, is instrumental in coordinating care. Using one pharmacy for all medications is a good strategy to follow to ensure these medications are dispensed accurately and safely.

Communication between providers within a healthcare team is also essential to effectively manage MS and other health conditions. When people with MS have a doctor's appointment, they can facilitate this communication by asking that physician's office to share a record of the appointment with their other providers after each visit. Effective communication between providers helps them prioritize an individual's treatment needs (for example, treating life-threatening conditions before MS). One's team may consider whether the same treatment could be used to manage more than one condition (for example, a healthy diet and exercise to treat high blood pressure, high cholesterol and MS fatigue), and which treatment is most affecting one's quality of life and daily function. This coordination of care is often very complicated. For those in need, the National MS Society offers free care management resources through their [MS Navigator program](#). Care managers are available to help people with MS assess their needs and develop a customized care plan.

A [recent study](#) looked at the impact of comorbidity and lifestyle factors on outcomes in MS, and how different lifestyle strategies may affect these outcomes. Researchers concluded obesity, cardiovascular conditions and psychiatric disorders (for example, anxiety, stress or mood disorders) cause an increase in MS disease activity, disability and mortality, as well as reduce overall quality of life. Researchers suggest effective management of MS disease activity and select comorbid conditions can be achieved by a number of healthy lifestyle strategies as adjunct therapies to DMTs. Data show a potential role for vitamin D supplementation in this regard. In addition, results indicate such habits as reducing/stopping tobacco and alcohol use, maintaining a healthy weight by eating a healthy diet and increasing physical activity, increasing the amount of sleep one gets, and reducing stress to be of benefit.



A number of other healthy techniques may help individuals better manage MS and any concurrent illnesses they may have. As discussed in our [April 2019 newsletter](#), mindfulness-based interventions, such as meditation, appear to be a safe, drug-free approach to coping with stress and anxiety, which in turn may have a positive ripple effect on other conditions. (For those interested in mindfulness, see this month's [iConquerMS Spotlight](#) for a study into this helpful practice.) Other helpful approaches may include acupuncture, massage, or seeking the encouragement of others through a support group. Some find distraction to be of benefit in reducing stress and anxiety. This distraction could take many forms, including movies, books, walking, journaling, writing, reading, time with family, friends, or pets. As we discussed [last month](#), there is also a growing emphasis on the role of brain preservation and cognitive exercises as important factors in the broader management of people with MS.

The majority of people with MS have other health conditions to contend with. Preventing and treating these secondary illnesses is essential to improving MS outcomes. The complexity of MS and the multitude of comorbid conditions that individuals with MS may experience require coordinated, comprehensive care. It is essential for people with MS to be engaged with a diverse team of healthcare providers with the expertise to manage their MS and any other health conditions they may have. Preventing comorbid conditions through a number of healthy lifestyle strategies can also help people with MS achieve the best outcomes and quality of life possible.

