

MS: A diagnosis, not a destiny



Making the case for living well with MS
through healthy lifestyle changes



About Overcoming MS

A diagnosis of multiple sclerosis (MS) can be devastating; in just seconds, the future that you saw for yourself and your loved ones has been shattered. Currently there is no cure for MS, with a diagnosis often coming in the prime of life when a person should be planning their future, not facing a lifetime of uncertainty. Hope can be hard to find.

Overcoming MS is here to give back that hope. We provide information and support, alongside a like-minded community to help everyone with MS understand that, through making healthy lifestyle choices, they can live well with MS.

Having MS is life-altering, but a full and healthy life with MS is possible.

Information and support available from Overcoming MS

Overcoming MS offers resources and tools so people with MS can learn about and make sustainable healthy lifestyle choices that can lead to significant improvements in wellbeing.

- **Information** about the latest research and practical recommendations.
- **Courses and events** to help build hope, connection and understanding.

- **The Live Well Hub** an online community for people living with MS.
- **Support for healthcare professionals** including information, the latest research and a CPD accredited training course.

More detail on our full range of resources can be found at overcomingms.org

Foreword

Every five minutes, someone, somewhere in the world is told that they have MS [1]. A lifelong condition of ongoing debilitation, with no cure. It can be a desperate time. And yet, there is hope.

In 2026 there can be no debate about the wealth of evidence showing that healthy lifestyle modifications can have a significant impact for a person living with MS – including symptom relief, reduced risk of relapse and slowing progression, wider brain health, reduced impact of other conditions that might worsen MS or make it harder to manage, and a person’s mental health or general wellbeing.

“This cannot wait any longer, too many people with MS have already missed out on too much.”

Yet research from Overcoming MS shows that this powerful knowledge is not widespread, and in fact less than a quarter of people believe that making healthy lifestyle choices would make a big difference to those living with MS – compared to two thirds who thought lifestyle changes would significantly benefit those with heart disease [2].

Recent years have seen significant progress in the diagnosis and treatment of MS with highly effective options available. But by not offering additional lifestyle information to everyone diagnosed with MS, to family members at risk, to those undergoing investigation for MS, we are failing our communities.

Just 16% of survey respondents strongly agreed that their healthcare professionals are discussing healthy lifestyle choices with them during appointments [3]. And yet almost a third of respondents in our public survey said that they would only feel comfortable making lifestyle changes to help address MS symptoms if an HCP recommended it to them [2].

It is a responsibility on all of us – healthcare professionals, policy makers, charities and other social providers, as well as members of the public themselves – to educate, to inform, and to take accountability. The evidence base is undeniable; Overcoming MS has the tools and resources. This cannot wait any longer, too many people with MS have already missed out on too much. The time for change is now.

Alexandra Holden
Chief Executive, Overcoming MS



How can lifestyle changes benefit people with MS and what is the evidence?

There is a growing body of evidence demonstrating that healthy lifestyle choices – such as balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, and stress management – can positively influence symptoms and slow progression in people living with multiple sclerosis (MS).

While these approaches are widely recognised as essential in other chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity, their role in MS care remains underutilised.

Improve or manage symptoms

In a 2025 survey of the Overcoming MS community [3], fatigue was shown to be the symptom that people with MS said had the most significant impact on their daily life (300 out of 549) with 78% saying they have felt weighed down by their health problems over the past month.

A healthy lifestyle can improve or help manage symptoms like fatigue [4], pain [5], mood [6], and cognitive difficulties like brain fog or slowed thinking [7]. Making small changes to what you eat, how you move, your quality of sleep or

“Overcoming MS gives me a sense of control over my condition which otherwise feels completely beyond my control - and hope and community to the extent I have time and desire to access.”

– Anonymous participant from Overcoming MS Community Survey

how you manage stress have all been found to affect these symptoms. As they all affect each other, small improvements to one behaviour can have a positive impact overall, making daily activities more manageable.

Reduce relapse or slow MS progression

Research has found that some lifestyle choices can reduce the likelihood of MS relapse [8] and slow MS disease progression [9]. Lifestyle choices such as having a healthy diet, stopping smoking, and taking regular physical activity currently have the strongest evidence [10-12]. In fact, a high-quality diet has been shown to reduce disability progression in people with MS by as much as 50% over 7 ½ years [13]. This is great news, as it shows that there are things that people with MS can do to support their well-being in both the short and long term. By making specific lifestyle choices, people can take an active role in stabilising their MS.

Support brain health

Healthy lifestyle choices can protect the brain from further damage and allow its natural ‘reserve’ to last longer. People with MS tend to lose brain tissue at a faster rate than those without MS. Their brains respond more to damage, and their ‘reserves’ get used up more quickly. Things that help protect the brain, boost its ability to heal and create new pathways to bypass areas of damage include eating and sleeping well, getting regular physical activity, and keeping stress under control [14-17].



Reduce the likelihood of other conditions

Lifestyle choices have been shown to impact the risk of developing other conditions like diabetes, obesity, and heart problems [18]. These can all negatively impact MS, affect the success of disease-modifying treatment, or even increase the risk of relapse [19]. They have also been found to prevent up to 40% of dementia cases [20], which is really positive given how common cognitive impairment is in MS. Preventing these other health issues helps better manage MS and contributes to a longer, healthier life.

Feel hope, take control of managing MS and live well

Living with MS can take a toll on mental health, with the lifetime risk of developing depression in MS patients being over 50% [21]. But making positive lifestyle choices has been found to increase the sense of hope, which has been linked to better resilience and empowers people with MS to feel they have more control over their choices and outcomes, regardless of their MS. It also gives them a sense of control over how they manage their MS and general health, often leading to a better quality of life [22].



Health systems that support the benefits of lifestyle changes

Health systems across the world are beginning to acknowledge the important role lifestyle can play in helping people with MS to live well. For example, the UK's National Institute of Care and Excellence (NICE), which provides evidence-based guidance for health and

social care, recommends that healthcare professionals offer personalised discussions to patients with MS about the value of lifestyle approaches such as regular physical activity, a healthy diet, and stress management in tackling fatigue.

Dr Kate Petheram, Consultant Neurologist at South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Foundation Trust:

One of the greatest challenges with MS is that its symptoms and progression can look different for everyone and this may lead to an overwhelming sense of uncertainty for those with the condition about the path ahead and how best to manage their MS.

Alongside medical interventions, providing patients with the knowledge about proven ways that lifestyle changes can help manage their specific symptoms and give them a greater sense of agency in their treatment, can be hugely empowering.

With a growing body of evidence about the positive impact of lifestyle changes on those living with MS, it's essential that these discussions are had with more people as part of their clinical care and I welcome the work Overcoming MS is doing to help raise awareness of this within the MS community and beyond.



“With a growing body of evidence about the positive impact of lifestyle changes on those living with MS, it's essential that these discussions are had with more people as part of their clinical care.”



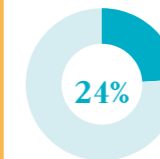
Closing the awareness gap for people with MS

Despite this compelling research, not enough people living with MS are being made aware of the potentially transformative benefits of adopting healthy lifestyle choices.

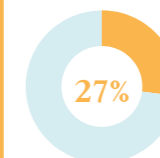
This lack of awareness is a major problem, because it means that thousands of people living with MS are missing out on the benefits healthy lifestyle changes could bring to their lives, and also leads to increased feelings of fear or helplessness at the point of diagnosis for many learning that they have MS.

A diagnosis of MS will inevitably be upsetting and lead to many questions and concerns for those with the condition, and their family and loved ones, but help and support is available.

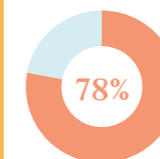
Thousands of people living with MS have already taken proactive steps to change their diet, exercise habits and made other healthy lifestyle choices that have had a significant positive benefit on their day-to-day experience of the condition. While no two people with MS are the same and everyone's experience of living with it is different, what matters is finding changes that work for you – starting small at first and making them at your own pace.



Less than a quarter (24%) of people believe that making health lifestyle choices (such as quitting smoking, eating a better diet, exercising more or reducing stress) would make a big difference to those living with MS – while two thirds thought lifestyle changes would significantly benefit those with heart disease.



27% of people said they weren't sure whether making health lifestyle choices would make a difference to those with MS, compared to just 5% who were unsure when it came to heart disease. This highlights a real lack of awareness amongst the public of the benefits of lifestyle changes to people with MS.



78% of people we surveyed agreed that a diagnosis of MS would make them feel fearful for the future and 58% that it would make them feel helpless or like they had no control over their future.



How do we shift the narrative around MS?

We know that it is possible to improve public awareness around how healthy lifestyle choices can help people to live better with a range of health conditions.

For chronic conditions such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and obesity, lifestyle interventions are widely recognised as essential to prevention, management, and even remission.

There may be some way to go to achieve this for MS, but we believe that with greater collaboration and more open conversations about the benefits of lifestyle changes for people with MS, we can change the script on what it means to live with this condition.

We all have a role to play in creating this change.

• **Healthcare professionals:**

For GPs and other HCPs that work closely with people living with MS, having clear and open discussions with patients about the positive, proactive changes they can make and how it can help with symptoms such as fatigue can be transformative.

• **The MS community:**

Those already living with MS and particularly those who have experienced the benefits for themselves of making healthy lifestyle changes, are critical in driving greater awareness and engagement with the topic. Peer-to-peer advocacy is a powerful tool for creating change and everyone can get involved.

• **People newly diagnosed with MS and their loved ones:**

remember that everyone's experience of MS is unique and it's important you take the right steps for you at your own pace. It all starts with positive conversations – with your GP or clinician, with the MS community and with family and friends who can play a role in supporting you to make lifestyle changes.

• **Policy makers:**

Global policy makers can help move the debate around lifestyle benefits for people living with MS forward by building discussions into standard care pathways. Sharing of new research and evidence across health departments would also be beneficial to the global MS community.

92% of people who have followed the Overcoming MS Program agree it has made a positive impact on their life. Over two thirds (71%) say this has been a moderate to extreme impact.

Research with our MS Community showed that just 40% of people with MS say that healthcare professionals are discussing healthy lifestyle choices with them during appointments. Additionally, almost a third of respondents in our public survey said that they would only feel comfortable making lifestyle changes to help address MS symptoms if an HCP recommended it to them.

74% of people we surveyed agreed that 'A diagnosis of MS would make me want to talk to others with the condition to understand what could help me manage it better.'

93% of people who followed the Overcoming MS Program said they felt their quality of life had improved as a result of the support from Overcoming MS and the community.





Personal story, Yasmin Neves

Yasmin was 29 when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, two years after first experiencing sudden vision loss in one eye. What began as blurred sight quickly deteriorated, followed by a series of unexplained symptoms that left her searching for answers.

“When I had the diagnosis, my medical professionals didn’t really leave me feeling anything but terrified. I left my appointment feeling completely lost and hopeless.”

Yasmin began looking for a way forward, that was when she discovered Overcoming MS.

“When I found Overcoming MS, it was just a little light in a very dark place and there was a little bit of hope that maybe there is a different path here.”

Yasmin decided to try some of the healthy lifestyle changes recommended by Overcoming MS and supported by growing

scientific evidence. She began with her diet, moving to a whole food, plant-based approach. She introduced meditation and made time to spend more time outdoors in nature. Regular exercise, particularly yoga, became central to her routine, so much so that she later trained as a yoga instructor.

The changes were not instant, and she describes the journey as challenging at times. But gradually she began to notice a difference.

“Lifestyle changes don’t happen overnight, and it took a few years for me to really embed these positive habits and feel the benefits, but I remember starting to feel the fatigue lift, my brain fog clear and my balance get better.”

Today, years on from her diagnosis, Yasmin feels healthier, happier and more in control of her future than she ever imagined possible. For her, the greatest impact has been hope, and the knowledge that there are positive steps she can take.

References

1. Multiple Sclerosis International Federation – Atlas of MS – 3rd Edition.
2. Survey conducted by OnePoll between 10th and 12th November 2025 with 2,000 representative UK adults.
3. Community Survey conducted by Overcoming MS in July 2025 with 549 respondents.
4. Weiland TJ, Nag N, De Livera A, Jelinek GA, Neate SL, Bevens W, Simpson-Yap S. Two healthy lifestyle scores are associated with lower subsequent fatigue risk using inverse probability weighting in an international longitudinal cohort of people with multiple sclerosis. *Eur J Neurol.* 2021 Sep;28(9):2952-2964. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ene.14956>
5. Marck CH, De Livera AM, Weiland TJ, Jelinek PL, Neate SL, Brown CR, Taylor KL, Khan F, Jelinek GA. Pain in People with Multiple Sclerosis: Associations with Modifiable Lifestyle Factors, Fatigue, Depression, Anxiety, and Mental Health Quality of Life. *Front Neurol.* 2017 Sep 5;8:461. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5591834/>
6. Chan JSY, Liu G, Liang D, Deng K, Wu J, Yan JH. Special Issue - Therapeutic Benefits of Physical Activity for Mood: A Systematic Review on the Effects of Exercise Intensity, Duration, and Modality. *J Psychol.* 2019;153(1):102-125. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30321106/>
7. de Sousa Fernandes MS, Ordônio TF, Santos GCJ, Santos LER, Calazans CT, Gomes DA, Santos TM. Effects of Physical Exercise on Neuroplasticity and Brain Function: A Systematic Review in Human and Animal Studies. *Neural Plast.* 2020 Dec 14;2020:8856621. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7752270/>
8. Proschinger S, Kuhwand P, Rademacher A, Walzik D, Warnke C, Zimmer P, Joisten N. Fitness, physical activity, and exercise in multiple sclerosis: a systematic review on current evidence for interactions with disease activity and progression. *J Neurol.* 2022 Jun;269(6):2922-2940. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9119898/>
9. Lin X, Zarghami A, Jelinek GA, Simpson-Yap S, Neate S, Nag N. Diet and omega-3 and vitamin D supplement use predict five-year fatigue and disability trajectories in people with multiple sclerosis. *Mult Scler Relat Disord.* 2024 Jun;86:105615 [https://www.msard-journal.com/article/S2211-0348\(24\)00189-5/fulltext](https://www.msard-journal.com/article/S2211-0348(24)00189-5/fulltext)
10. Simpson-Yap S, Nag N, Probst Y, Jelinek G, Neate S. Higher-quality diet and non-consumption of meat are associated with less self-determined disability progression in people with multiple sclerosis: A longitudinal cohort study. *Eur J Neurol.* 2022 Jan;29(1):225-236. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9292143/>
11. Rodgers J, Friede T, Vonberg FW, Constantinescu CS et al. The impact of smoking cessation on multiple sclerosis disease progression. *Brain.* 2022 May 24;145(4):1368-1378. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9128822/>
12. Motl RW. Exercise and Multiple Sclerosis. *Adv Exp Med Biol.* 2020;1228:333-343. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32342468/>
13. Longitudinal associations between quality of diet and disability over 7.5 years in an international sample of people with multiple sclerosis (*European Journal of Neurology*, July 2023) <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ene.15980>
14. Hughes AJ, Dunn KM, Chaffee T. Sleep Disturbance and Cognitive Dysfunction in Multiple Sclerosis: a Systematic Review. *Curr Neurol Neurosci Rep.* 2018 Jan 29;18(1):2. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29380072/>
15. Ercan Z, Bilek F, Demir CF. The effect of aerobic exercise on Neurofilament light chain and glial Fibrillary acidic protein level in patients with relapsing remitting type multiple sclerosis. *Mult Scler Relat Disord.* 2021 Oct;55:103219. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34433118/>
16. Burns MN, Nawacki E, Kwasny MJ, Pelletier D, Mohr DC. Do positive or negative stressful events predict the development of new brain lesions in people with multiple sclerosis? *Psychol Med.* 2014 Jan;44(2):349-59. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4123859/>
17. Navarrete-Pérez A, Gómez-Melero S, Escibano BM, Galvao-Carmona A, Conde-Gavilán C, Peña-Toledo MÁ, Villarrubia N, Villar LM, Túnez I, Agüera-Morales E, Caballero-Villarraso J. MIND Diet Impact on Multiple Sclerosis Patients: Biochemical Changes after Nutritional Intervention. *Int J Mol Sci.* 2024 Sep 17;25(18):10009. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11431943/>
18. Du Y, de Bock GH, Vonk JM, Pham AT, van der Ende MY, Snieder H, Smidt N, Krabbe PFM, Alizadeh BZ, Lunter G, Corpeleijn E. Lifestyle factors and incident multimorbidity related to chronic disease: a population-based cohort study. *Eur J Ageing.* 2024 Nov 28;21(1):37. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11604909/>
19. Salter A, Kowalec K, Fitzgerald KC, Cutter G, Marrie RA. Comorbidity is associated with disease activity in MS: Findings from the CombiRx trial. *Neurology.* 2020 Aug 4;95(5):e446-e456. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9629214/>
20. Livingston G, Huntley J, Sommerlad A, Ames D et al. Dementia prevention, intervention, and care: 2020 report of the Lancet Commission. *Lancet.* 2020 Aug 8;396(10248):413-446. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7392084/>
21. Filip Mustač, Hanna Pašić, Filip Medić, Borna Bjedov, Luka Vujević, Maša Alfirević, Branka Vidrih, Katarina Ivana Tudor, Marija Bošnjak Pašić. Anxiety and Depression as Comorbidities of Multiple Sclerosis. *Psychiatria Danubina.* 2021 Spring-Summer;33(Suppl 4):480-485. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34718269/>
22. Gil-González I, Martín-Rodríguez A, Conrad R, Pérez-San-Gregorio MÁ. Quality of life in adults with multiple sclerosis: a systematic review. *BMJ Open.* 2020 Nov 30;10(11):e041249. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7705559/>



Find more resources for people living with MS and join our Living Well community at overcomingms.org

W overcomingms.org
T +44 1844 318778
E contact@overcomingms.org

f   @overcomingms

Overcoming MS

Report issued March 2026

UK: Registered Charity No. 1157579.
Registered Company limited by guarantee in England and Wales No. 9044459.
In Scotland No. SC050752.