

# Best Practices for Encouraging Physical, Emotional, and Nutritional Wellness in Patients With Multiple Sclerosis

Bryan Walker<sup>1</sup>, Aliza Ben-Zacharia<sup>2</sup>, Amy Dix<sup>3</sup>, Jong-Mi Lee<sup>4</sup>, Carrie Sammarco<sup>5</sup>, Jollene Shirley<sup>6</sup>, Colleen Miller<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Duke University, Durham, NC, USA; <sup>2</sup>CGD Center for MS, Mount Sinai Hospital, New York, NY, USA; <sup>3</sup>Kansas City MS Center, Prairie Village, KS, USA; <sup>4</sup>Stanford Healthcare, Stanford, CA, USA; <sup>5</sup>NYU Langone Health, MS Comprehensive Care Center, New York, NY, USA; <sup>6</sup>Sanofi, Cambridge, MA, USA

## OBJECTIVE

- To report insights from advanced practice clinicians (APCs) on best practices promoting wellness in MS
- To identify key obstacles to achieving wellness and potential solutions for overcoming them, and to optimize collaboration with colleagues to promote wellness

## INTRODUCTION

- MS is a multifaceted disease that pervades all aspects of patients' lives<sup>1</sup>
- Patients are interested in using lifestyle strategies to support wellness and ameliorate their disease symptoms<sup>2,3</sup>
  - Patients are faced with an overload of potentially inappropriate lay information and lack guidance tailored to their needs
- Optimizing wellness is an important component of preventive medicine
  - Wellness initiatives may use complementary and alternative medicine approaches, as well as traditional medical approaches<sup>4</sup>
  - Wellness is important for people of all ages and health states, especially those with chronic disease
  - Wellness is an aspect of healthcare encouraged by US government agencies and healthcare laws<sup>5</sup>
- Healthcare providers face challenges in effectively supporting or encouraging patient wellness initiatives
  - Lack of rigorous scientific evidence, especially on the benefits of yoga, meditation, diet, and nutraceutical supplementation<sup>6,7</sup>
  - Lack of awareness of local wellness resources
  - Time constraints
  - The need to individualize wellness initiatives to the patient
  - Lack of Evidence-Based Practice wellness guidelines

## METHODS

- During a Sanofi-sponsored advisory board held in March 2017, a panel of 25 APC MS experts from across the US discussed best practice recommendations for promoting wellness in MS patients
- APC experts included certified/prescribing Physician Assistants, Advanced Practice Nurses and Nurse Practitioners
- The following results reflect the consensus achieved during the discussion of available data and clinical experience

## CONCLUSIONS

- APCs can be key to promoting wellness in MS patients, and can do so by helping patients overcome barriers to wellness, giving specific instructions on how to achieve wellness goals, tracking progress, and providing encouragement
- Emotional wellness is critical to address, as it is intertwined with and required for improving physical and nutritional wellness
- Given the lack of evidence-based guidelines on wellness in MS, further provider education is necessary to reduce barriers and encourage meaningful wellness initiatives during healthcare interactions

## RESULTS

### Components of Wellness

Figure 1. Components of Wellness



- APCs agreed that emotional wellness is the most important component of overall wellness, and is a prerequisite for achieving nutritional and physical wellness goals, but all 3 aspects of wellness are intertwined (Figure 1)
- Emotional wellness
  - Depression/anxiety due to the unpredictability of MS and uncertainty for the future is very common in real-world practice
  - APCs noted an increased risk of suicidal ideation in MS patients compared with the general population, and that it is difficult to detect suicidal tendencies in some patients<sup>8</sup>
  - Suicidal ideation may be driven by brain pathology of MS and depression, or as self-euthanasia in patients with poor quality of life
  - Smoking/alcohol/drug use may represent self-medication for depressive symptoms in some patients<sup>9,10</sup>
  - Social isolation is common among MS patients due to depression/sadness or increasing disability
  - APCs noted the importance of addressing sexual well-being with MS patients during office visits
- Nutritional wellness
  - Advisors agreed on the importance of education and guidance on dietary habits, healthy food choices, and nutrition
  - Access to healthy foods may be problematic for some patients
  - Some patients may need nutritional supplements
- Physical wellness
  - APCs noted the strong correlation between physical and emotional wellness, highlighting the potential emotional benefits that exercise can provide
  - Issues related to use of wheelchair/accessibility, thermosensitivity, elimination dysfunction, and lack of motivation/fatigue need to be addressed to facilitate exercise programs

### Barriers and Potential Solutions to Improving Wellness in MS

- The APC advisors discussed several barriers to achieving overall wellness in their patients, and potential solutions to overcome them (Figure 2)

Figure 2. Barriers and Solutions to Improving Wellness in MS

Patient Barrier	Potential Solution
Lack of motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish a trusting relationship and explain the benefits of wellness by providing tangible examples and instructions</li> <li>APC perseverance is important if previous attempts have failed</li> <li>Treat depression with psychotherapy and anti-depressants</li> <li>Address fatigue</li> </ul>
Lack of guidance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide educational materials with clear step-by-step instructions</li> <li>Refer to rehabilitation professionals for specific instructions related to safe mobility</li> </ul>
Feeling discouraged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Celebrate any incremental progress made by the patient</li> <li>Offer to patients the opportunity to speak with other patients who have gone through similar issues</li> </ul>
Financial barriers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research freely-available local community programs to improve physical and social/emotional wellness (eg. yoga, volunteering)</li> <li>Identify exercises that can be done without enrolling in a gym</li> <li>Educate patients on low-cost, healthier food choices at fast food or other low-cost restaurants or in the grocery store</li> </ul>
Lack of resources in rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Contact local charities and the National MS Society, Multiple Sclerosis Association of America, or others to help identify support services in rural areas</li> </ul>
APC Barrier	Potential Solution
Limited visit time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allocate a few minutes to get a sense of patient's wellness needs, or follow up by phone or contact the family</li> <li>Take notes on wellness during visit to track progress over time</li> </ul>
Lack of evidence-based guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>APCs can take a proactive role in research, policy-making, and establishing clear evidence-based guidelines</li> </ul>

### References

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### APC Role in Overcoming Barriers in MS: Facilitate, Instruct, and Track

- The APC advisors reported that they can guide, mentor, and support MS patients to promote long-lasting healthy habits
  - Facilitate
    - APCs can provide encouragement and positive reinforcement to help patients make healthy choices and lifestyle changes
    - Utilize counseling approaches that include stages of change, motivational interviewing, and cognitive behavioral therapy
  - Instruct
    - APCs can provide patients with printed materials with step-by-step, easy-to-follow instructions, or direct patients to web resources to reinforce the wellness plan
  - Track
    - Documentation of wellness discussions, initiatives, and progress will help APCs to consistently follow up on patients' wellness at future visits
    - Involvement of family members will help uncover wellness habits of MS patients

### Strategies for Improving Wellness in MS Patients

- The APC advisors suggested strategies to improve overall wellness in MS patients (Figure 3)

Figure 3. Strategies for Improving Wellness in MS

