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## Discussion paper

# Managing multiple sclerosis in primary care: Are we forgetting something?

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**Abstract** Multiple sclerosis (MS) is the commonest debilitating, progressive neurological disorder in most Western countries. It is important for many reasons, including the personal costs, levels of disability produced, age group affected and the resultant economic burden placed on individuals, families and the community. Although it is thought to be an auto-immune condition, in general little is understood about the causation of MS and the factors that trigger or contribute to exacerbations and deterioration. This overview of the literature will consider some important studies examining the relationship between lifestyle and psychosocial factors and MS progression. These studies suggest that nutrition, sunlight, exercise, stress and social factors can all modulate the rate of progression of MS and the level of disability. Although appearing in respected journals, this information tends to be little known or discussed by clinician and patient alike. If lifestyle approaches do offer potential avenues for therapy, this raises important questions regarding the management of MS in primary care. More widely prescribed conventional medicines have been studied in more detail but are only modestly effective and may have significant side-effects. Are we presently neglecting the most effective approach of combining the non-drug or holistic approach with the best of conventional pharmaceutical therapies, and if so what are the implications of this omission?

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