

► Background

Our [2018-2022 Research Strategy](#) set a bold ambition to Stop MS. After consultation with our Research Network and key researchers, our [Research Strategy Committee](#) concluded this strategy is still fit for purpose.

Our 2023-24 Research Strategy Extension extends the duration and remit of the strategy for two more years. This brings it in line with the timings of our organisational strategy '[Every MS Story](#)'.

Over the past five years, the research environment has changed in many ways.

We've seen challenges caused by COVID-19 and the UK exiting the European Union. And challenges facing the NHS also impact the capacity to deliver research.



Yet we've seen enormous strides in our understanding and treatment of MS, including:

- The licensing of two disease modifying therapies (DMTs) for progressive MS, and huge expansion of the progressive MS clinical trial landscape
- New mechanisms of progression identified, and the concept of treating 'progression independent of relapses' gaining traction
- Progress in predicting MS prognosis with advanced MRI techniques
- As DMTs are lengthening lifespans, a greater need for clinical focus on symptoms, wellness, quality of life and the importance of managing multi-morbidities
- Momentum generated in the research community around preventing MS with breakthrough papers on potential causal role of Epstein Barr Virus (EBV).
- Increasing profile of Public and Patient Involvement (PPI)
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) becoming a national priority
- Increasing culture of funding collaborations across organisations and conditions
- Expanded use of real-world data in MS research

► Our progress 2018-22

Over the past five years, we've made real progress under each of the themes set out in our Research Strategy.

Slowing, stopping and reversing the accumulation of disability

We've funded work to understand the fundamental biological mechanisms of progression. We have new targets for treatment to be investigated in clinical trials. And we're funding or co-funding many more first-of-their-kind trials for progressive MS.

Risk reduction and prevention

We've invested in research investigating risk factors associated with MS. We've improved our communication of MS risk factors to close relatives of people with MS. We've made clear the strength of evidence and impact of behaviour change, especially around smoking.

Symptom management

We've funded underpinning work to secure a £2.5M grant from NIHR, to develop a more effective and accessible fatigue intervention. We've supported high quality research around cognition, with results of new interventions due soon. And we evaluated and reframed our Care and Services research programme to increase the likelihood of our funded studies having tangible impact.

Predictive markers of MS

We've funded research to understand factors affecting how your MS may progress in the

long-term, with the aim of identifying biomarkers to predict prognosis. This progress is enabling better prediction of progression using MRI, although this isn't yet routine clinical practice.

Research infrastructure

We've continued to fund, evaluate and support the MS Society Tissue Bank and the UK MS Register. We've ensured the research community is aware of the programmes and can access them in a fair and transparent way. We now have two world-leading resources being used to make breakthroughs for people with MS.

Ways of working

We've grown our fellowship offer to support the next generation of MS research leaders. We've launched a research EDI action plan to make our research more diverse. Our PPI programme is internationally recognised. And we've secured over £17 million in leveraged funds into MS research. This activity ultimately increases the speed of impact for people with MS.

“As Research Network members and people with ‘lived-experience’ of MS, our views are very important. We always feel like we’re heard and our concerns are valid and taken into consideration. We really feel like we’re part of the team delivering Octopus.”

- Lyndsay Shellard, Octopus treatment selection PPI rep

► Our priorities 2023-24

We haven't stopped focusing on the priorities laid out in our 2018-2022 Research Strategy. We'll continue to fund research addressing these existing priorities. But we've got some strategic areas of focus for this extension period.

Stopping progression

We're committed to directing and funding research to find treatments that can slow, stop or even one-day reverse the accumulation of disability in MS.

We need a growing pipeline of treatments for disability accumulation ready to be tested, and our world-leading clinical trials programme is responsible for funding and supporting trials in all key areas of treatment (promoting myelin repair and protecting nerves as well as preventing immune attacks). The Octopus clinical trials platform has been launched and now needs to be established as the go-to resource for accelerating trials in MS.

We will:

- Provide strategic leadership and support to the Octopus team
- Fund and support our two translational research Centres of Excellence in Edinburgh and Cambridge
- Fund and support the vital resource the MS Society Tissue Bank provides
- Support the strategy of the International Progressive MS Alliance, to ensure results from the Alliance's work feed into new targets for trials of potential treatments



“The approach Professor Jeremy Chataway’s taking with Octopus is really encouraging, as is the work of the Progressive MS Alliance. In MS research, there have been times of high energy and times when it’s flagged. Progressive MS is now centre stage. We’ve got a truly high-energy time and we need to make the most of it.”

Professor Alan Thompson, University College London

Preventing MS

We're committed to making progress in this area, meaning ultimately fewer people will develop MS.

We need to improve our understanding of risk factors and how they interact, so we can develop ways to prevent people developing MS. We know MS is caused by a complex interaction of genes and environment, with recent data showing the strongest evidence to date that EBV may play a causal role. We must seize the momentum this has generated to move this area forward.

Developing and testing interventions for prevention is not something we alone can take forward, due to the scale and costs required. This must be a global effort, and we have a key role to play to support initiatives, and funding, in this area over the next few years.

We will:

- Strategically contribute to an international consensus on what are the next steps around EBV research
- Scope and establish a UK MS Prevention and Risk Factor Taskforce
- Review and continue our data discovery awards scheme

Managing MS

Much progress has been made in symptom management research over the last 10-20 years but making progress in priority symptoms areas (such as fatigue, pain,

cognition and mobility) are still so important for the quality of life of people with MS.

REFUEL-MS is a key fatigue management programme grant, led by Professor Rona Moss-Morris and co-funded with NIHR, to develop a more effective and accessible fatigue treatment than currently available.

We will:

- Scope and set up a Doctoral Training Centre in symptom management research, to enhance training and capacity building
- Provide active support for REFUEL-MS
- Explore cross-condition partnerships in priority symptoms such as pain, to enable larger-scale and/or definitive effectiveness studies

“We know MS fatigue is extremely disabling, yet it remains largely untreated in the UK. We believe REFUEL-MS will fill that gap. Using theory and evidence to design and optimise a new personalised online programme and test it in a large NHS-led trial, will change how we treat MS fatigue and address the shocking unmet need that currently exists.”

– Professor Rona Moss-Morris, King's College London

Underpinning infrastructure

We need to enable a growing, skilled and diverse MS research workforce that will produce tomorrow's leaders and breakthroughs. We have reviewed our capacity building offer to ensure we're developing the workforce capabilities required to keep MS research at the cutting edge.

In our 2020-2024 organisational strategy, we committed to transforming the way we work to put diversity and inclusion at the heart of everything we do. To complement this, we developed an [action plan for our funded research](#).

We will:

- Set up and develop an Early Career Researcher Network
- Support a pipeline of more junior clinical colleagues via various funding, support, networking and mentoring schemes
- Increase the use of and collaboration with the UK MS Register's rich dataset to develop real-world data capability within the MS research community
- Implement and evolve our research EDI action plan
- Continue to use our influence leverage additional funds into MS research

If you have any questions please email us:

research@mssociety.org.uk

“I recently attended my first UK MS Register datathon. We had training and a chance to practice. In teams, we picked a research question and tried to answer it. We had just six hours and could only use the MS Register data. It's different to my research question, but genetics also uses a lot of big data. So I'll be able to apply my new skills in my project too. I'm excited to find out where my research will lead.”

- Raghda Shaban Tawfeeq Al-Najjar, PhD Student,
University of Cambridge



▶ Let's stop MS together

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