National Multiple Sclerosis Society

2026 REQUEST FOR APPLICATIONS

Understanding the Impact of Aging in Multiple Sclerosis

The mission of the National MS Society is to cure multiple sclerosis (MS) while empowering people affected by MS to live their best lives. Aging intersects with MS biology, diagnosis, and long-term management in increasingly important ways as more people are diagnosed with MS earlier and live longer. This request for applications (RFA) supports early, developmental studies that address key knowledge gaps in aging and MS and is intended to position investigators for future, larger awards.

Background: A growing proportion of people living with MS are older adults, but key questions remain about how aging influences disease activity, progression, comorbidities, and treatment decisions. Normal aging can complicate the interpretation of clinical and imaging measures commonly used in MS, making it difficult to distinguish age-related changes from disease-related progression. Research suggests that several biological aging processes, such as immunosenescence, inflammaging, accelerated cortical atrophy, and reduced remyelination capacity, may occur earlier or more rapidly in MS, interact with MS pathophysiology, and contribute to disability accumulation. Reproductive aging, including menopause and age-related hormonal changes, may further modify disease trajectories. In addition, comorbidities are highly prevalent in older adults with MS and influence outcomes, safety profiles, and real-world treatment decisions. Despite these complexities, older individuals remain underrepresented in research, limiting the evidence base guiding management later in life.

There is a critical need for research that refines biomarkers and outcome measures to distinguish aging-related changes from MS activity, improves understanding of mechanisms driving progression in older adults, clarifies the impact of comorbidities, and develops interventions that support healthy aging through physical activity, rehabilitation, and other geroscience-informed approaches.

Purpose of this RFA: This initiative aims to support early-stage and feasibility studies that clarify how chronological and biological aging affect MS biology, clinical expression, and therapeutic decision-making. This will be accomplished through a **two-year** research grant mechanism, with a maximum **budget of $200,000 direct costs**. Preliminary data is not explicitly required for this initiative. Instead, this funding can be used to generate preliminary data and demonstrate the feasibility of new approaches, or perform small, self-contained research projects to address these knowledge gaps. Project proposals can also leverage existing datasets to study aspects of aging in MS. Ultimately, projects are expected to advance early-stage research and enable competitive applications for larger, longer-term support.

Areas of specific interest include:

- Studies examining interactions between aging processes (e.g., immunosenescence, inflammaging, reproductive aging, biological age acceleration) and MS pathophysiology, including mechanisms underlying progression and neurodegeneration in older adults
- Research to validate or refine imaging, fluid, or composite biomarkers that distinguish MS-related changes from normative aging and improve individualized risk stratification in older populations

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- Studies characterizing disease trajectories, cognitive decline, disability accumulation, or recovery from relapses in older individuals, including the development or validation of age-adjusted prognostic tools
- Research investigating how cardiovascular, metabolic, psychiatric, oncologic, or other age-associated comorbidities influence MS disease activity, progression, treatment safety, or biomarker interpretation
- Studies aimed at improving the validity, calibration, or interpretation of clinical, cognitive, patient-reported, or imaging outcome measures in older adults with MS, including the development of age-adjusted reference standards

Areas NOT supported by this RFA include:

- Studies of aging-related biological changes outside of the context of MS
- Studies of MS biology not connected to the impact of aging
- Patient education and/or service delivery programs
- Infrastructure or resource-building requests (e.g., biobanks)
- Incremental extensions of ongoing research projects without new methods or approaches

Submission guidelines and process:

Qualified Applicants: Applicants must hold an MD, PhD, or the equivalent at the time of submission. It is expected that the applicant is considered eligible by their institution to apply for independent funding.

Qualified Institutions: This RFA is open to investigators at not-for-profit research institutions. Collaborations with commercial organizations are allowed.

Funding: Up to **$200,000 USD direct costs** for up to 2 years (maximum of $100,000 USD annually) of support will be provided and must be justified based on the scientific work plan. For US institutions, additional indirect costs of 10% for allowable expenses will be added in accordance with our Policies and Procedures.

Preliminary Data: Preliminary data is not explicitly required for this funding mechanism. Data may be included if available.

Letter of Intent (LOI): A letter of intent (LOI) is required to determine if a proposal is aligned with the objectives of the RFA. The LOI must be submitted through the National MS Society's online grant submission portal, MSGrants. Additional details regarding LOI format and requirements can also be found on MSGrants. **An approved LOI is required prior to the submission of a full proposal.** Prospective applicants are also strongly encouraged to contact Society scientific staff about their potential research project during concept development prior to submission (see contact information below).

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Important dates:

- LOIs will be accepted beginning: **April 21, 2026**
- LOI deadline: **June 17, 2026 | 5:00 PM ET**
- Notification of LOI outcome: **July 10, 2026**
- Full proposal deadline: **September 9, 2026 | 5:00 PM ET**
- Award notification: **January, 2027**
- Anticipated award start: **April 1, 2027**

Reviewers will evaluate full proposals based on the following criteria:

- **Rationale:** Are the hypotheses sufficiently justified? Would testing the hypotheses lead to a significant advance in knowledge relevant to Pathways to Cures?
- **Relevance:** How well does the proposal align with the objective of the RFA as well as Society Research Funding Principles and Priorities.
- **Research Team:** Are the lead investigator and collaborators qualified and well-suited to carry out the proposed research?
- **Scientific Plan:** Is the research plan sufficiently developed and appropriate to the project? Are the specific aims clearly defined? Has the investigator considered alternative outcomes and the impact on the plan? Are the analysis plan and statistical methodology appropriate for the project?
- **Environment:** Is the research environment appropriate and likely to contribute to the success of the proposed research? Does the environment foster collaborative arrangements that may support the proposed research activities? Is the research environment compliant with appropriate rules and regulations for study conduct?
- **Budget:** Is the proposed budget reasonable and justified relative to the proposed research?
- **Plain Language Description:** Applicants must provide a plain language description of the proposed project. These will be used by volunteer community reviewers who will provide their perspective based on their lived experience with MS and that feedback will be used as part of prioritizing scientifically meritorious applications for funding consideration.

Applicants can also contact Society scientific staff for clarification of any issues or questions.

Society Staff Contacts:

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