Future of Disability Sport in Australia

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What is MS?

Multiple Sclerosis (MS) remains one of the most common causes of neurological disability in the young adult population (aged 18–40 years) with over 2.9 million people affected worldwide. More than 37,756 Australians live with MS and over 7.6 million Australians know someone or have a loved one with this potentially debilitating disease.

Three times as many women have MS than men. Symptoms vary between people and can come and go; they can include severe pain, walking difficulties, debilitating fatigue, partial blindness and thinking and memory problems. For some, MS is characterised by periods of relapse and remission, while for others it has a progressive pattern of disability. MS robs people of quality of life, primarily driven by the impact of MS on pain, independent living, mental health and relationships.

MS Australia is Australia's national multiple sclerosis (MS) not-for-profit organisation that empowers researchers to identify ways to treat, prevent and cure MS, seeks sustained and systemic policy change via advocacy, and acts as the national champion for Australia's community of people affected by MS.

MS Australia represents and collaborates with its state and territory MS Member Organisations, people with MS, their carers, families and friends and various national and international bodies to:

- Fund, coordinate, educate and advocate for MS research as part of the worldwide effort to solve MS
- Provide the latest evidence-based information and resources
- Help meet the needs of people affected by MS

George Pampacos
President

Rohan Greenland
Chief Executive Officer

The Future of Disability in Sport in Australia

Executive Summary

MS Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) and researchers from the University of Queensland (UQ) as part of this consultation into the future of disability in sport in Australia. Our submission responds to the questions seeking to understand what is working well, where gaps remain, and what needs to change so people with MS and other people with disability can access, participate in and progress through sport in ways that suit them.

This submission draws on the experiences and expertise of MS Australia's Lived Experience Expert Panel (LEEP). The LEEP is a panel of people who either live with MS or are a carer for someone living with MS, and who provide MS Australia with expert advice to inform our advocacy work. To ensure this submission also reflects broader community perspectives, MS Australia sought feedback from people living with MS and carers through an online survey, which was open for two weeks in July 2026.

Over five and a half million Australians currently live with a disability[1] and they represent over 20 per cent of the Australian community. Ensuring sport programs and activities are accessible and inclusive is essential for Australians living with disabilities to connect them to all aspects of public life.

For many people with MS, symptoms are hidden and they live with an invisible disability. These symptoms can include fatigue, pain, cognitive changes such as memory loss or difficulty problem-solving, weakness, blurred vision, numbness, prickly or tingling sensations, heat sensitivity, dizziness, balance and coordination issues, and bladder or bowel issues. Symptoms can fluctuate from day to day and may affect a person's ability to participate consistently in sport or physical activity. Feedback highlighted the importance of flexible participation options, MS-informed coaches and staff, affordable and accessible programs, clear information about inclusive opportunities, and co-design with people with MS, carers and other people with disability. It is important that sporting organisations, clubs, coaches and staff understand that not all disabilities are visible, and that people with MS may need flexible, individualised and practical support to participate safely and confidently.

MS Australia Recommendations

Sport and recreation programs:

- adopt flexible, inclusive approaches that recognise the different ways people with disability and carers may participate after diagnosis or taking on a caring role.
- provide disability-informed coaching, heat-management strategies and welcoming environments that allow people with disability to take part in ways that suit their symptoms and energy levels.
- are co-designed with people with disability and carers, and include practical adjustments such as flexible attendance, modified activities, rest breaks, adaptive equipment and alternative participation roles.

Sporting organisations:

- address common barriers for people with disability by improving affordability, accessibility and program suitability and provide clear information about participation options.

- address common barriers for people living with fluctuating and invisible disabilities including MS by improving fatigue and heat management.
- ensure management, coaches and staff receive disability education, so they understand how to best support people with disability and better understand the individual needs of each participant.
- Governments and sporting organisations should improve access to clear, centralised and accessible information about inclusive community sport options, including venue accessibility, program flexibility, costs and available supports.
- Decision-makers should directly consult people with MS, carers and other people with disability when designing disability sport policy, programs and funding models, to ensure participation is safe, affordable, inclusive and responsive to real needs.

Sport and recreation programs & disability sporting organisations

Experiences of sport and physical activity after an MS diagnosis or caring role

We first sought to understand the experiences of LEEP members, people living with MS and carers in relation to sport, recreation and organised physical activity. This included whether people currently participate, have participated since an MS diagnosis or taking on a caring role, and what has supported or made participation difficult.

People told us that participation was supported by community, social connection, inclusion, and encouragement from clubs, family and friends, particularly when attendance was flexible. LEEP member, Julie, shared the importance of being able to participate without pressure to attend every week: “I got to enjoy the group atmosphere and health benefits without the expectation to show up every week or the feeling like I’d let down the team if I couldn’t attend.”

Barriers to participation were often linked to fatigue, reduced energy or confidence, fear of injury, difficulty attending consistently, unsuitable timing and uncertainty about available activities. The most commonly identified barriers were fatigue and heat sensitivity, lack of suitable programs, cost, and mobility or accessibility issues. People also raised concerns about worsening symptoms, limited understanding of MS and disability, and a lack of appropriately trained staff.

Barriers for people with MS to participate, stay involved, and progress in sport

We then asked people to identify the biggest barriers that make it difficult for people with MS to get involved in, stay involved in or progress through sport or physical activity. People were asked to select any barriers that applied to their experience and were invited to provide further detail if they wished. The most common barriers were fatigue and heat sensitivity, followed by a lack of suitable programs, cost, and mobility or accessibility issues. Other barriers included fear of symptoms worsening, negative attitudes or limited understanding, insufficiently trained staff, transport difficulties, unclear participation pathways, and limited information about available options.

The LEEP and survey participants also emphasised that fluctuating and often invisible MS symptoms can make consistent participation difficult. These barriers often intersect. One person described how fatigue, reduced confidence, concerns about reliable attendance and uncertainty about available options affected their ability to participate: “I feel like I can’t do it anymore. I don’t have the energy or competitive spirit like I used to and that is frustrating. I don’t feel I would be reliable in attendance and where are sporting groups I could go to.”

Understanding what inclusive sport would look like in an ideal future

We then sought to understand what practical changes would make the biggest difference for people with MS participating in sport. Survey participants prioritised flexible participation, such as breaks, modified activities and varied intensity, alongside MS education for coaches and staff. Other suggestions included heat-management measures, MS-specific social programs, funding for assistive technology, clearer information about available support, more welcoming environments and fairer competitive opportunities.

> "**Flexible participation**: Allow participants to take breaks, modify activities, or choose different intensity levels without feeling single out.
>
> **Heat management**: Schedule sessions for cooler times of the day, ensure access to cold water, cooling towels or cooling vests.
>
> **Trained coaches and staff**: Educate staff about MS, including fatigue, balance issues, cognitive symptoms and the fact that symptoms vary greatly from person to person."
>
> – LEEP member Deize

What sporting organisations, coaches, and staff need to understand about MS

People were also asked what sporting organisations, coaches and staff need to better understand about MS. Feedback indicates considerable room for improvement, especially in recognising that MS symptoms fluctuate – people may be "fine one day" but not the next – and that fatigue, pain, cognitive difficulties and mobility needs may be invisible or change over time. Participants called for flexible attendance, better MS education for coaches and staff, and a willingness to ask participants what support they need rather than assuming. As one person stated, "Ask participants what support they need rather than assuming. Create an environment where participants feel comfortable to share their needs without fear of judgement." Overall, they wanted greater understanding and "empathy, not exclusion."

Supporting people with fluctuating MS symptoms and changing needs

People were asked how sport and recreation programs could respond more effectively to the changing symptoms, energy levels, mobility and support needs experienced by people with MS and other disabilities. Participants prioritised flexible attendance, modified activities, rest breaks and the ability to reduce intensity without penalty. They also recommended disability-aware staff training, adaptive equipment and classifications, cooler session times, shorter games, additional substitutions, carer involvement and alternative roles such as coaching or administration on difficult days. This reflects the need for programs to recognise that MS can change from day to day. Sport programs should be co-designed with people with disability to ensure support is responsive, safe and inclusive.

> "That although we may be fine one day, the next we may not. They should also have a willingness to learn and understand the issues of MS."
>
> – LEEP member Carol

MS Australia recommends that sport and recreation programs:

- adopt flexible, inclusive approaches that recognise the different ways people with disability and carers may participate after diagnosis or taking on a caring role.
- provide disability-informed coaching, heat-management strategies and welcoming

environments that allow people with disability to take part in ways that suit their symptoms and energy levels.

- are co-designed with people with disability and carers, and include practical adjustments such as flexible attendance, modified activities, rest breaks, adaptive equipment and alternative participation roles.

MS Australia recommends that sporting organisations:

- address common barriers for people with disability by improving affordability, accessibility and program suitability and provide clear information about participation options.
- address common barriers for people living with fluctuating and invisible disabilities including MS by improving fatigue and heat management.
- ensure management, coaches and staff receive disability education, so they understand how to best support people with disability and better understand and the individual needs of each participant.

Improving access to information about inclusive community sport options

People were asked what would make it easier for people with MS and other disabilities to find accessible, welcoming and suitable sport or physical activity options in their community. Participants recommended a central or community-based directory with clear information about accessibility, facilities, adaptability and participation expectations.

> "Some sort of community based directory which informs the public of the options each sport/activity has to encourage or welcome people with disability to their activity. Including information about the facilities, the group activity, expectations regarding teams, and options for adaptability."
>
> – LEEP member Julie

They also wanted clubs to advertise that they are disability-friendly, provide transparent details on their websites and work with MS Australia or local MS organisations. Other suggestions included accessible venues, opportunities to try activities before committing, peer connections and reassurance that appropriate safety support is available.

MS Australia recommends that governments and sporting organisations improve access to clear, centralised and accessible information about inclusive community sport options, including venue accessibility, program flexibility, costs and available supports.

Further considerations for making disability sport in Australia more inclusive

Finally, people were invited to share any further views about what decision-makers should understand about disability sport, physical activity and MS. They stressed the importance of consulting people with disability directly and not making decisions based on assumptions. One person put this clearly: "Talk to people with disabilities, ask them what they need, don't just assume you know what is best for us." Participants also highlighted the mental-health, social and quality-of-life benefits of physical activity, alongside the financial burden of participation and assistive technology. They called for NDIS support, participation subsidies, and safe, welcoming opportunities for everyone.

MS Australia recommends that decision-makers directly consult people with MS, carers and other people with disability when designing disability sport policy, programs and funding models, to ensure participation is safe, affordable, inclusive and responsive to real needs.

Conclusion

The feedback received from LEEP members, people living with MS and carers shows that sport, recreation and physical activity can play an important role in supporting health, wellbeing, social connection and quality of life. However, people with MS continue to face significant barriers to getting involved, staying involved and progressing in sport, including fatigue, heat sensitivity, cost, accessibility, lack of suitable programs, limited information, and a lack of understanding about fluctuating and often invisible symptoms.

To make disability sport more inclusive, systems, programs and organisations must be flexible, accessible, affordable and informed by the lived experience of people with disability. This includes providing practical adjustments, MS-specific education for coaches and staff, clearer information about inclusive opportunities, appropriate heat-management strategies, support for assistive technology and opportunities for people to participate in ways that suit their symptoms, energy levels and circumstances.

MS Australia strongly encourages decision-makers, sporting organisations and governments to work directly with people with MS, carers and other people with disability when designing disability sport policy, programs and funding models. Inclusive sport will only be achieved when people with disability are listened to, believed and supported to participate safely, confidently and meaningfully in their communities.

Reference

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022), Disability, Ageing and Carers, Australia: Summary of Findings, ABS Website, accessed 10 June 2026.