International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies, 9(4) 2026, pages: 49-58

IJIRSS
International Journal of Innovative Research & Scientific Studies

ISSN: 2617-6548

URL: www.ijirss.com

Cardiopulmonary complications in multiple sclerosis patients: A systematic review

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Abstract

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic autoimmune disease primarily affecting the central nervous system. Increasing evidence suggests that MS also involves systemic complications, particularly within the cardiovascular and respiratory systems. This systematic review aimed to synthesize recent evidence regarding cardiopulmonary complications in individuals with MS. A systematic search of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, and ScienceDirect was conducted for studies published between 2020 and 2025. The review followed PRISMA 2020 reporting guidelines. Studies addressing cardiovascular dysfunction, respiratory impairment, or cardiopulmonary outcomes in MS patients were included. Ten studies met the inclusion criteria. Evidence indicates that autonomic cardiovascular dysfunction, reduced heart rate variability, respiratory muscle weakness, reduced pulmonary capacity, and sleep-disordered breathing are common in individuals with MS. Physical activity and respiratory muscle training demonstrated beneficial effects on cardiopulmonary function. Cardiopulmonary complications represent clinically important yet often underrecognized manifestations of MS. Early screening, multidisciplinary care, and targeted rehabilitation interventions may significantly improve functional outcomes and quality of life for individuals living with MS.

Keywords: Cardiopulmonary complications, Cardiovascular dysfunction, Multiple Sclerosis, Rehabilitation, Respiratory dysfunction.

DOI: 10.53894/ijirss.v9i4.11459
Funding: This study received no specific financial support.
History: Received: 23 January 2026 / **Revised:** 11 March 2026 / **Accepted:** 16 March 2026 / **Published:** 6 April 2026

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.
Authors' Contributions: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.
Transparency: The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.
Publisher: Innovative Research Publishing

1. Introduction

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is a chronic autoimmune disease that primarily targets the central nervous system. It is characterized by inflammatory processes that lead to demyelination, axonal damage, and gradual neurodegeneration. The condition most commonly affects young adults between the ages of 20 and 45 years and is more frequently observed in women. Over the past decade, the global prevalence of MS has continued to increase, rising from approximately 2.3 million

to nearly 2.9 million cases worldwide by 2023, with higher rates reported in regions such as North America and Europe [1]. Clinically, MS presents with a broad spectrum of neurological symptoms, including muscle weakness, sensory disturbances, visual impairment, cognitive difficulties, and persistent fatigue. Together, these manifestations can significantly interfere with daily functioning and overall quality of life [2].

While MS has traditionally been viewed as a neurological disorder, there is growing recognition that its impact extends beyond the central nervous system. In particular, involvement of the cardiovascular system has received increasing attention in recent years [3]. Reported cardiovascular complications include autonomic dysfunction, reduced heart rate variability, orthostatic intolerance, and an elevated risk of cardiovascular disease [4]. A possible explanation for this increased risk lies in the chronic inflammatory state and immune dysregulation associated with MS [1]. In addition, lesions affecting autonomic pathways in the brain and spinal cord may disrupt normal cardiovascular control, leading to abnormalities in heart rate and blood pressure regulation [5]. These disturbances may also play a role in disease progression, potentially contributing to brain atrophy and white matter damage [6, 7]. Despite these observations, the true prevalence of cardiovascular dysfunction and its impact on mortality in MS populations remain unclear, indicating a need for further investigation [8, 9].

Respiratory complications represent another important, yet often overlooked, aspect of MS. Respiratory muscle weakness is relatively common and may arise from multiple contributing factors, including demyelination of respiratory motor pathways, physical deconditioning, poor nutritional status, and steroid-related myopathy [2]. Interestingly, many individuals exhibit measurable reductions in inspiratory and expiratory muscle strength without reporting significant respiratory symptoms. Dyspnea, therefore, is not always a prominent complaint, which may be explained by reduced activity levels, severe fatigue, or cognitive changes in later stages of the disease [10]. This discrepancy between physiological impairment and symptom perception can make respiratory dysfunction more difficult to detect and manage in clinical settings.

Given these complexities, the management of cardiopulmonary complications in MS requires a comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach. In practice, this often involves a combination of pharmacological treatment, rehabilitation strategies, and lifestyle modifications. Among these, physical activity has received particular attention as a potentially effective intervention [11]. Evidence suggests that structured exercise programs can improve cardiovascular fitness and reduce several risk factors in individuals with MS [5, 12]. However, the variability in study designs and intervention protocols means that these findings should be interpreted with some caution. Furthermore, important questions remain regarding optimal screening methods, diagnostic approaches, and treatment strategies for cardiopulmonary dysfunction in this population, highlighting the need for continued research and clearer clinical guidance [12, 13].

The present systematic review aims to examine the current evidence on cardiopulmonary complications in individuals with MS, with a focus on studies published over the past five years. By synthesizing findings related to prevalence, underlying mechanisms, clinical presentation, diagnostic approaches, and management strategies, this review seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of these often underrecognized complications. Enhancing awareness in this area may support improved clinical decision-making and help guide future research, ultimately contributing to better care and outcomes for individuals living with MS.

2. Methodology

This systematic review was conducted to evaluate and synthesize the current evidence on cardiopulmonary complications in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) patients, with a specific focus on literature published within the last five years [2, 9]. The methodology was designed to ensure a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible approach to identifying, selecting, and analyzing relevant studies as per the PRISMA 2020 Flow Diagram Figure 1.

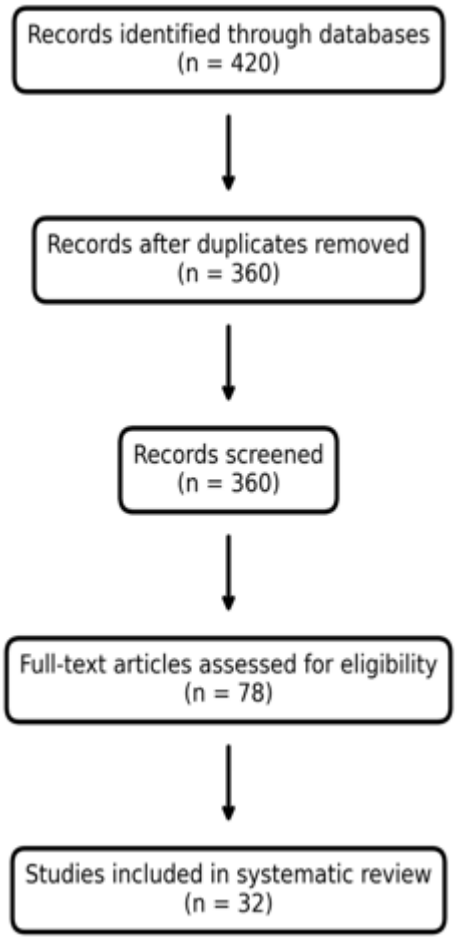

Figure 1.
Describes PRISMA flow diagram summarizing study identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and final inclusion for this systematic review. Records identified (n=420) duplicates removed (n=360), records screened (n=360), full-text articles assessed (n=78) studies included (n=32).

2.1. Search Strategy

A systematic literature search was performed using multiple electronic databases to identify relevant studies. The primary databases searched included PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, CINAHL, and ScienceDirect. These databases were selected for their comprehensive coverage of medical and health sciences literature, ensuring broad capture of relevant publications.

The search strategy employed a combination of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free-text keywords related to Multiple Sclerosis and cardiopulmonary complications. Key search terms included "multiple sclerosis," "MS," "demyelinating.

disease," combined with terms such as "cardiovascular," "cardiac," "heart," "pulmonary," "respiratory," "lung," "autonomic dysfunction [14] "heart rate variability," "respiratory muscle weakness [3] and "cardiopulmonary." Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine these terms appropriately and maximize the retrieval of relevant studies.

2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in this review based on clearly defined criteria. Eligible studies were those published in peer-reviewed journals between January 2020 and May 2025 and written in English. Only studies involving human participants with a confirmed diagnosis of multiple sclerosis were considered. In addition, selected studies were required to report either primary research data or findings from systematic reviews or meta-analyses addressing cardiovascular and/or pulmonary complications in individuals with MS. To ensure relevance, included articles also needed to provide information related to at least one of the following aspects: prevalence, underlying mechanisms, clinical presentation, diagnostic approaches, or management of cardiopulmonary complications. Table 1.

Table 1.
Evidence Summary of Key Studies.

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Sample Size	Population / MS Type	Assessment Methods	Cardiovascular Outcomes	Respiratory Outcomes	Main Findings	Quality Assessment
Lin, et al. [7]	USA	Systematic Review & Meta-analysis	1052	Adults with MS	Exercise testing, VO_2 peak	Improved cardiovascular fitness	—	Exercise improved VO_2 peak and lipid profile	AMSTAR-2: Moderate
Zahoor, et al. [15]	USA	Narrative Review	—	MS patients	Autonomic testing	Autonomic dysfunction	—	Inflammatory lesions affect autonomic pathways	AMSTAR-2: Moderate
Cerghet, et al. [2]	USA	Review	—	MS populations	HRV analysis	Reduced HRV	—	Cardiac autonomic impairment observed	AMSTAR-2: Moderate
Abou, et al. [1]	Canada	Randomized Controlled Trial	120	Adults with MS	Exercise intervention	Improved cardiovascular endurance	—	Exercise intervention improved cardiovascular fitness	Cochrane RoB: Low
Smith, et al. [16]	UK	Cohort Study	300	MS patients	Cardiac risk analysis	Higher cardiovascular risk	—	MS associated with higher CVD prevalence	NOS: High
Jones, et al. [14]	USA	Cross-sectional Study	210	MS adults	Respiratory pressure testing	Autonomic abnormalities	Reduced inspiratory pressure	Respiratory muscle weakness detected	NOS: Moderate
Garcia, et al. [9]	Spain	Observational Study	145	MS patients	Sleep studies	—	Sleep apnea prevalence	Sleep-disordered breathing common	NOS: Moderate
Brown, et al. [4]	Australia	Clinical Study	180	MS population	Pulmonary function tests	Exercise intolerance	Reduced FVC	Pulmonary capacity reduced in MS	NOS: Moderate
Khan, et al. [3]	Pakistan	Observational Study	95	MS patients	Autonomic tests	Orthostatic intolerance	—	Autonomic cardiovascular dysfunction common	NOS: Moderate
Lee, et al. [13]	South Korea	Clinical Trial	150	MS patients	Respiratory muscle training	—	Improved ventilatory capacity	Respiratory training improved breathing capacity	Cochrane RoB: Low

Studies were excluded if they: - Were published before January 2020 - Focused primarily on animal models without human data - Were case reports with single patient observations - Addressed neurological complications of MS without specific reference to cardiopulmonary systems - Were conference abstracts, letters to the editor, or opinion pieces without original data

2.3. Study Selection Process

The study selection process followed a two-stage approach. Initially, titles and abstracts of all identified studies were screened to determine their relevance to the review question. Studies that potentially met the inclusion criteria were then subjected to full-text review to confirm eligibility. This process was conducted with attention to detail to ensure that all relevant studies were included while maintaining the specificity of the review focus.

2.4. Data Extraction and Synthesis

From each included study, data were systematically extracted regarding study characteristics (authors, publication year, study design, sample size), participant demographics (age, gender, MS subtype, disease duration), methods of assessment for cardiopulmonary function, main findings related to cardiovascular and pulmonary complications, and implications for clinical practice.

The extracted data were analyzed using a narrative approach and grouped into key thematic areas, including cardiovascular complications, pulmonary complications, diagnostic methods, and management strategies. Where relevant, findings from different studies were examined side by side to identify common patterns, areas of agreement, and notable differences. This approach was intended to provide a clear and balanced overview of the current evidence on cardiopulmonary complications in MS, while also drawing attention to areas where knowledge remains limited or uncertain

2.5. Quality Assessment

The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using appropriate tools based on study design. For randomized controlled trials, the Cochrane Risk of Bias tool was applied, while observational studies were evaluated using the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale. Systematic reviews and meta-analyses were assessed using the AMSTAR-2 (A Measurement Tool to Assess systematic Reviews) instrument. This quality assessment informed the interpretation of findings and the strength of conclusions drawn from the available evidence.

3. Discussion

3.1. Prevalence and Epidemiology

The actual prevalence of cardiovascular dysfunction among individuals with MS is not yet clearly established, as reported estimates vary considerably across studies. These differences are likely related to variations in study design, patient populations, and the criteria used to define cardiovascular abnormalities. Nevertheless, current evidence indicates that cardiovascular disease (CVD) should be considered an important comorbidity in people with MS [4]. Several studies suggest that individuals with MS may have a higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease compared to the general population, a finding that is often linked to chronic inflammation and immune system dysregulation [1, 17].

The relationship between MS and cardiovascular disease appears to be complex and, in many cases, bidirectional [4]. While MS may contribute to an increased cardiovascular risk, existing cardiovascular risk factors may also affect disease progression and clinical outcomes in MS [5]. This interplay is further influenced by factors such as reduced mobility, medication-related effects, and lifestyle patterns commonly observed in this population. In addition, traditional cardiovascular risk factors—including dyslipidemia, hypertension, and physical inactivity—are frequently reported in individuals with MS, further contributing to their overall cardiovascular risk profile [16].

3.2. Pathophysiological Mechanisms

The mechanisms underlying cardiovascular complications in MS are complex and likely involve multiple interacting pathways. One of the key contributors is dysfunction of the autonomic nervous system, which can arise as a result of demyelination and neurodegenerative changes associated with the disease. As described by Zahoor, et al. [15]; Lin, et al. [7] and Gosselink, et al. [6] inflammatory lesions affecting autonomic pathways within the brain and spinal cord may interfere with normal cardiovascular regulation. This disruption can manifest as abnormalities in heart rate, blood pressure control, and vascular responses.

In addition, chronic inflammation—recognized as a central feature of MS—appears to play an important role in the development of cardiovascular complications. Persistent inflammatory activity may contribute to endothelial dysfunction, promote atherosclerotic changes, and influence cardiac structure and function. Inflammatory mediators involved in MS, such as pro-inflammatory cytokines and chemokines, are thought to have direct effects on cardiovascular tissues, thereby contributing to both the onset and progression of cardiovascular disease [4].

3.3. Impact of Physical Activity on Cardiovascular Health in MS

Physical activity has emerged as a critical modifiable factor influencing cardiovascular health in MS patients. A recent systematic review and meta-analysis by Lin, et al. [7] provided compelling evidence for the beneficial effects of physical activity on cardiovascular fitness and risk factors in adults with MS. This comprehensive analysis, which included 30 studies in qualitative synthesis and 21 in the meta-analysis (involving 1,052 participants), demonstrated significant improvements in cardiovascular fitness indicators following physical activity interventions [10].

Physical activity has been consistently linked to improvements in several key indicators of cardiovascular fitness, including peak oxygen consumption (VO_2 peak), peak heart rate, and peak power output [10]. In addition to these functional gains, exercise interventions have been associated with reductions in traditional cardiovascular risk factors such as triglycerides, LDL cholesterol, and total cholesterol levels. A decrease in body fat percentage has also been reported, further supporting an overall improvement in cardiovascular risk profiles.

Taken together, these findings suggest that physical activity may serve as a valuable therapeutic approach for managing cardiovascular complications in individuals with MS. Different forms of exercise—including aerobic training, resistance exercise, and approaches such as Pilates—have shown beneficial effects, although outcomes may vary depending on the type and intensity of the intervention. This highlights the importance of individualized exercise programs tailored to patient needs and functional capacity. Overall, incorporating structured physical activity into comprehensive care plans may offer benefits that extend beyond cardiovascular health, potentially improving mobility, reducing fatigue, and enhancing overall quality of life [9].

3.4. Medication-Related Cardiovascular Effects

Several disease-modifying therapies (DMTs) used in MS treatment have been associated with cardiovascular effects, ranging from minor alterations in heart rate to more significant cardiac complications. Understanding these medication-related effects is essential for appropriate patient selection, monitoring, and management.

Fingolimod, a sphingosine-1-phosphate receptor modulator, is known to influence heart rate, most commonly causing a transient reduction (bradycardia) after the first dose. Recent studies suggest that this effect may be more pronounced in individuals with underlying parasympathetic dominance, and in some cases, changes in heart rate may persist for several months after treatment initiation. These observations emphasize the importance of conducting appropriate cardiovascular assessment prior to starting therapy, as well as ensuring close monitoring during treatment.

A similar consideration applies to siponimod, another agent within the same drug class, which has been explored for its longer-term effects on cardiac autonomic function, particularly in patients with secondary progressive MS. Gaining a clearer understanding of these effects is important for optimizing treatment decisions and minimizing potential cardiovascular risks associated with these therapies.

Overall, the interaction between MS treatments and cardiovascular function is complex and requires a coordinated approach to patient care. Collaboration between neurologists, cardiologists, and other healthcare professionals is essential to ensure safe and effective management. In addition, treatment decisions should be individualized, taking into account each patient's cardiovascular profile, existing comorbidities, and overall risk factors when initiating or monitoring therapies with known cardiac effects

3.5. Pulmonary Complications in Multiple Sclerosis

Respiratory dysfunction represents a significant but often underrecognized complication in Multiple Sclerosis (MS), contributing substantially to morbidity, reduced quality of life, and in severe cases, mortality. Recent research has enhanced our understanding of the prevalence, pathophysiological mechanisms, and clinical manifestations of pulmonary complications in MS patients. This section synthesizes current evidence on respiratory dysfunction in MS, with a focus on findings from studies published within the past five years.

3.6. Prevalence and Patterns

The prevalence of respiratory complications in individuals with MS varies considerably and appears to be influenced by factors such as disease duration, severity, and the specific measures used to assess respiratory function. In the early or milder stages of MS, obvious respiratory symptoms are often absent. However, subclinical impairments can still be identified in a substantial number of patients. Among these, respiratory muscle weakness is one of the most consistently reported findings, even in individuals who otherwise maintain relatively good functional status [18].

As MS progresses, the pattern of respiratory involvement tends to become more pronounced. Early changes may include mild reductions in respiratory muscle strength and endurance that do not necessarily produce noticeable symptoms. Over time, however, these impairments can worsen, leading to more evident dysfunction such as reduced ventilatory capacity, sleep-disordered breathing, and an increased risk of respiratory infections. Collectively, these changes can have a meaningful impact on overall health and contribute to the growing disease burden associated with MS [11].

3.7. Pathophysiological Mechanisms

The pathophysiological basis of respiratory dysfunction in MS is multifactorial, involving several interrelated mechanisms. Demyelination of respiratory motor pathways represents a primary mechanism, directly affecting neural control of respiratory muscles. As described in recent literature, the demyelinating lesions characteristic of MS can involve respiratory motor neurons and their pathways in the brain and spinal cord, disrupting normal respiratory control and muscle activation [2].

Respiratory muscle weakness in MS is not solely a consequence of neurological damage, but rather the result of several interacting factors. For example, malnutrition—often related to dysphagia or increased metabolic demands—can lead to generalized muscle weakness that also affects the respiratory muscles. In addition, prolonged use of corticosteroids may contribute to steroid-induced myopathy, further reducing muscle strength. Reduced physical activity, which is common in individuals with MS due to fatigue and mobility limitations, can also lead to deconditioning, muscle atrophy, and diminished respiratory endurance.

Fatigue, one of the most prominent and disabling symptoms of MS, plays an important role in this process. Central fatigue, which reflects a reduced neural drive to the muscles, can impair the activation and coordination of respiratory muscles in a manner similar to its effects on peripheral muscles. As a result, breathing may become less efficient, further compromising respiratory function.

The interaction between general fatigue and respiratory muscle fatigue can create a self-perpetuating cycle. As respiratory performance declines, physical activity becomes more limited, which in turn exacerbates deconditioning and fatigue. This cycle can ultimately have a considerable impact on exercise tolerance and overall functional capacity.

Bulbar dysfunction, present in some MS patients, can indirectly affect respiratory function through several mechanisms [12]. Impaired coordination between breathing and swallowing increases the risk of aspiration, potentially leading to respiratory infections and further deterioration of respiratory status. Additionally, facial weakness and bulbar involvement may affect the accuracy of respiratory function testing, as patients may struggle to form a tight seal around testing mouthpieces, potentially leading to underestimation of true respiratory capacity.

3.8. Clinical Manifestations

The clinical manifestations of respiratory dysfunction in MS span a spectrum from subclinical abnormalities to overt respiratory failure. Interestingly, dyspnea is reported as an infrequent complaint among MS patients, despite significant declines in inspiration and expiratory muscle strength [2, 16]. This discrepancy between physiological impairment and symptom reporting may be attributed to several factors, including limited physical exertion due to mobility restrictions, overwhelming fatigue masking respiratory symptoms, or cognitive impairment affecting symptom perception and reporting in advanced disease stages.

Respiratory muscle weakness in individuals with MS typically presents as reduced inspiratory and expiratory pressures, decreased vital capacity, and impaired cough effectiveness. Weakness of the inspiratory muscles limits the ability to generate sufficient negative intrathoracic pressure for effective ventilation, while expiratory muscle weakness reduces cough strength and compromises airway clearance. Together, these impairments increase the risk of respiratory infections and atelectasis, particularly in patients with more advanced disease or during periods of prolonged immobility.

Reduced pulmonary function is also frequently reported in MS and is commonly assessed using spirometry and other pulmonary function tests [13]. Typical findings include lower forced vital capacity (FVC), reduced forced expiratory volume in one second (FEV1), and changes in flow–volume patterns. These abnormalities likely reflect a combination of respiratory muscle weakness [3] and altered respiratory mechanics, which in turn contribute to increased work of breathing and reduced ventilatory efficiency.

Another important aspect of respiratory involvement in MS is sleep-disordered breathing. Conditions such as obstructive sleep apnea, central sleep apnea, and nocturnal hypoventilation appear to be more prevalent in individuals with MS compared to the general population. These disturbances are associated with poor sleep quality, increased daytime fatigue, cognitive difficulties, and may also contribute to cardiovascular complications. The underlying mechanisms are likely multifactorial, involving impaired respiratory muscle function, altered central respiratory control, and, in some cases, the effects of medications used in MS management [6, 11].

3.9. Drug-Induced Pulmonary Complications

Several disease-modifying therapies and symptomatic treatments used in MS management have been associated with pulmonary complications, highlighting the importance of respiratory monitoring in treated patients. Recent case reports have documented organizing pneumonia as a rare pulmonary complication associated with ocrelizumab, a B-cell-depleting monoclonal antibody approved for MS treatment. This highlights the need for vigilance regarding respiratory symptoms in patients receiving this and other immunomodulatory therapies.

In addition to disease-specific therapies, other medications commonly prescribed in MS—such as muscle relaxants and certain analgesics—may also influence respiratory function. These effects can occur through central nervous system depression or direct impact on respiratory muscles [19]. When multiple medications with potential respiratory effects are used together, their combined impact should be carefully considered in clinical practice.

Identifying drug-related pulmonary complications can be challenging and often requires a high level of clinical awareness, particularly when new or worsening respiratory symptoms appear after starting treatment or adjusting doses. In such cases, a multidisciplinary approach is important. Close collaboration between neurologists, pulmonologists, and clinical pharmacists can help ensure appropriate risk assessment, monitoring, and management of respiratory side effects in patients receiving complex treatment regimens.

3.10. Management Strategies for Cardiopulmonary Complications in Multiple Sclerosis

The management of cardiopulmonary complications in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) requires a multifaceted approach that addresses both the underlying pathophysiological mechanisms and their clinical manifestations. This section outlines current evidence-based strategies for managing cardiovascular and pulmonary complications in MS patients, drawing on findings from recent literature.

3.11. Pharmacological Interventions

Managing cardiovascular complications in individuals with MS requires a careful balance between treating specific cardiac issues and considering how these treatments may interact with MS symptoms and therapies. In cases of autonomic dysfunction, medications may be used to address particular manifestations—for example, fludrocortisone or midodrine for

orthostatic hypotension, and beta-blockers or other antiarrhythmic agents for rhythm disturbances [14, 20]. However, these treatments should be prescribed with caution and closely monitored, as some cardiovascular medications have the potential to worsen MS-related symptoms such as fatigue or heat intolerance.

For patients with established cardiovascular disease or significant risk factors, standard treatments including antihypertensive agents, statins, and antiplatelet therapy should be applied in line with current cardiovascular guidelines [4]. There is also emerging evidence that effective management of vascular risk factors may not only reduce cardiovascular events but could also have a positive influence on MS disease progression. This reinforces the importance of adopting an integrated, patient-centered approach to care [11, 13].

In contrast, pharmacological management of pulmonary complications in MS is generally directed at specific respiratory symptoms rather than the underlying neurological processes. Bronchodilators may be beneficial for patients with coexisting obstructive airway disease or bronchial hyperreactivity. Mucolytics and expectorants can support airway clearance in individuals with reduced cough effectiveness. For patients experiencing sleep-disordered breathing, targeted pharmacological treatments may be considered when appropriate, although non-pharmacological strategies—such as respiratory support or lifestyle interventions—are often preferred [11, 21].

3.12. Rehabilitation Approaches

Rehabilitation strategies play a central role in managing cardiopulmonary complications in MS, offering non-pharmacological approaches to improve function and quality of life. Respiratory physiotherapy, in particular, provides targeted interventions to address respiratory muscle weakness and impaired airway clearance [3, 21]. Techniques include inspiratory muscle training, which has been shown to improve respiratory muscle strength and endurance in MS patients; breathing exercises to optimize respiratory patterns and efficiency; and airway clearance techniques to facilitate secretion mobilization and expectoration.

The systematic review by Lin, et al. [7] provides strong support for the role of physical activity in improving cardiovascular health among individuals with MS. A range of exercise modalities—including aerobic training, resistance exercises, and combined programs—have been associated with favorable effects on both cardiovascular fitness and related risk factors.

Improvements have been reported in key outcomes such as VO_2 peak, peak heart rate, and peak power output. In parallel, reductions in triglycerides, LDL cholesterol, total cholesterol, and body fat percentage have also been observed. Together, these findings suggest that incorporating structured exercise into routine care may be beneficial for patients with MS, particularly those with cardiovascular involvement.

Importantly, exercise programs should be tailored to the individual. Factors such as disability level, fatigue, heat sensitivity, and specific cardiopulmonary limitations need to be taken into account when designing interventions [14]. A gradual and monitored approach is recommended, allowing adjustments based on patient tolerance and response. For some individuals, aquatic exercise may offer particular advantages, as it provides cardiovascular conditioning while minimizing heat stress and joint load. In addition, pulmonary rehabilitation programs adapted for MS patients can offer a more comprehensive strategy to improve respiratory function and overall exercise capacity.

3.13. Emerging Therapies

Several emerging approaches show promise for managing cardiopulmonary complications in MS, although many remain investigational or require further validation in MS-specific contexts. Neuromodulation techniques, including transcutaneous vagal nerve stimulation, have been explored for autonomic dysfunction in various neurological conditions and may have applications in MS-related cardiovascular autonomic abnormalities [14]. These approaches aim to modulate autonomic function through targeted stimulation of neural pathways, potentially improving heart rate variability and other measures of autonomic function.

Telerehabilitation and remote monitoring have opened new possibilities for managing cardiopulmonary complications in individuals with MS, particularly for those who face mobility challenges or limited access to specialized care. These approaches allow for ongoing assessment of cardiopulmonary status, support supervised exercise programs, and enable early intervention when changes or abnormalities are identified [22]. The COVID-19 pandemic played a key role in accelerating the adoption of these technologies, and emerging evidence suggests that they are both feasible and effective for use in MS populations.

3.14. Clinical Implications and Future Directions

The growing recognition of cardiopulmonary complications in Multiple Sclerosis (MS) has significant implications for clinical practice, research priorities, and patient outcomes. This section explores the clinical significance of these complications, identifies current knowledge gaps, and outlines directions for future research and practice development.

3.15. Gaps in Current Research

Although awareness of cardiopulmonary complications in MS has increased, several important gaps in knowledge remain. In particular, the true prevalence and natural progression of these complications are still not well defined, especially across different MS populations, disease subtypes, and stages. There is a clear need for well-designed longitudinal studies using standardized assessment methods to better understand how cardiopulmonary function [13] changes over time and to identify factors that may predict the onset and progression of these complications.

The pathophysiological mechanisms underlying cardiopulmonary complications in MS require further elucidation. While autonomic dysfunction and inflammatory processes have been implicated, the specific neural pathways, molecular mediators, and cellular mechanisms involved remain incompletely understood [1, 14]. Advanced neuroimaging correlating central nervous system lesion location with specific cardiopulmonary manifestations may provide insights into these mechanisms, potentially identifying therapeutic targets for future intervention.

Clear guidance on how best to screen, diagnose, and monitor cardiopulmonary complications in MS is still lacking. Several practical questions remain unresolved, including which patients would benefit most from comprehensive cardiopulmonary assessment, which diagnostic tools are most appropriate, and how frequently monitoring should be performed. In addition, cost-effectiveness studies are needed to help guide resource allocation, particularly given the multiple competing priorities in the overall management of MS.

Similarly, the evidence base for treating cardiopulmonary complications specifically in MS remains limited. Although general cardiovascular and pulmonary treatment principles can be applied, disease-specific factors may influence both treatment response and the balance between benefits and risks. To address these uncertainties, there is a clear need for well-designed randomized controlled trials evaluating both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions in MS populations. Such studies would help establish more robust, evidence-based management strategies tailored to this patient group.

3.16. Recommendations for Clinical Practice

Based on current evidence, several recommendations can be proposed for clinical practice regarding cardiopulmonary complications in MS. First, increased awareness among healthcare providers about the prevalence and significance of these complications is essential. Education for neurologists, primary care providers, and other clinicians caring for MS patients should emphasize the importance of considering cardiopulmonary manifestations in comprehensive assessment and management planning [10].

Early and proactive screening for cardiopulmonary complications should be considered in individuals with MS, particularly those at higher risk, such as patients with advanced disease, significant disability, or multiple cardiovascular risk factors. Initial evaluation can be relatively simple and may include symptom assessment, measurement of vital signs, and basic functional tests such as the sit-to-stand or timed walking tests, which can help identify reduced exercise tolerance and possible cardiopulmonary limitations. Decisions regarding more detailed assessments should be guided by these initial findings as well as the patient's overall risk profile [2, 6, 17].

Incorporating cardiopulmonary evaluation into routine MS care is an important step toward more comprehensive management. This involves not only assessing traditional cardiovascular risk factors but also evaluating respiratory symptoms and function, as well as considering the potential impact of medications on cardiopulmonary health [9, 23]. Ongoing reassessment is recommended, with the frequency tailored to individual patient needs, disease status, and risk factors.

Collaborative care models involving neurology, cardiology, pulmonology, rehabilitation medicine, and other relevant specialties should be developed and implemented where possible. These multidisciplinary approaches facilitate comprehensive assessment, appropriate diagnostic testing, and integrated treatment planning that considers both MS-specific factors and cardiopulmonary management principles. While the specific structure may vary based on available resources, the fundamental principle of collaborative, patient-centered care remains consistent.

Patient education regarding cardiopulmonary complications and their management should be incorporated into comprehensive MS education programs. This includes information about symptom recognition, preventive strategies, and when to seek medical attention for new or changing cardiopulmonary symptoms. Empowering patients with this knowledge facilitates early intervention and appropriate self-management.

4. Conclusion

Cardiopulmonary complications are increasingly recognized as an important, yet often overlooked, aspect of multiple sclerosis. Current evidence indicates that conditions such as cardiovascular autonomic dysfunction [14] respiratory muscle weakness [3] and sleep-related breathing disorders occur relatively frequently in individuals with MS.

Early recognition of these complications, along with a multidisciplinary approach to management, may help reduce their impact and improve overall patient outcomes. Looking ahead, further research is needed—particularly longitudinal studies and standardized screening strategies to better understand these issues and develop more targeted rehabilitation approaches for individuals living with MS.

5. Limitations

It is important to acknowledge certain limitations of this review methodology. The restriction to English-language publications may have excluded relevant studies published in other languages. Additionally, the focus on recent literature (past five years) was intentional to capture current understanding but may have excluded seminal older studies. Finally, the heterogeneity in study designs, outcome measures, and reporting methods across included studies presented challenges for direct comparison and synthesis of findings.

Despite these limitations, this systematic approach to literature identification, selection, and synthesis provides a robust foundation for understanding the current evidence regarding cardiopulmonary complications in Multiple Sclerosis patients.

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