

# Staying informed about MS in the news



## Learn to sort the science from the sales pitches, and make informed decisions about your MS.

by Tim Coetzee, PhD

If you Google “MS research,” you’ll get an avalanche of hits. How do you determine which information to trust—especially about experimental treatments, such as stem cell therapy? Here are a few ways I check the reliability of MS research news.

### Reading into research

When I hear about a new claim, I start asking questions:

- **What is the source?** Is it coming from a well-established, prestigious medical journal, such as [The New England Journal of Medicine](#), or is it a press release from a manufacturer, meaning that the information is probably not independently vetted?
- **Is the news related to treating lab animals or people with actual MS?** Many things that work in mice don’t succeed in people.
- **How many people were involved in the study being reported?** Ten? Five hundred? More is better, if properly done.
- **Was it a controlled trial?** This means the study compared two groups and used the practice of “blinding”—in which neither the participants nor the researchers knew who received the placebo and who received the treatment being studied—to block any potential biases of the researchers.
- **Are claims backed up by clinical trials instead of personal testimonials?** MS is different for everyone, so it’s better to draw conclusions from large study groups rather than from individual anecdotes.
- **Does the treatment claim to be a cure for many different disorders?** If so, I’m skeptical.

In addition, I sometimes see phrases on websites that can be tip-offs that a treatment may not be a good choice. For example, “This is the cure.” If a cure had been discovered, it would have been reported worldwide by credible news agencies. Or, “Please pay in advance.” As with most purchases, a reputable company delivers a product at the time of payment.

### **Thinking about stem cell therapies**

[Research in stem cells](#) holds great promise, but getting cell therapies outside of rigorously designed clinical trials can be risky and of unproven value. Being a smart consumer is imperative in an era when stem cell therapy is being promoted by clinics worldwide.

I get suspicious when something is touted as safe simply because it’s “natural.” Think of how many “natural” muscle-building or weight-loss pills have been found harmful, such as ephedra, a plant that is now banned in the U.S. because of the severe gastrointestinal and psychiatric side effects it caused.

Likewise, just because a treatment involves a person’s own cells, it doesn’t mean it is safe: As soon as cells leave your body, they may become contaminated with bacteria or viruses if improperly handled. Injecting cells also may damage the tissue into which they are injected. Until this and other issues are overcome, stem cell treatments remain risky. The FDA has established standards for development of stem cell therapies and so far, none have been approved for use in MS.

More than 10 million people seek information on the [Society’s website](#) each year. We work hard to ensure this information is accurate and comprehensive so that people have the information needed to make informed decisions.

**Timothy Coetzee, PhD, is chief research officer of the National MS Society.**

Read more on “[Stem Cell Therapies in MS](#)” [PDF].