

Your Health Reference Sheet
Topic: Multiple Sclerosis
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Over 500,000 Americans suffer from Multiple Sclerosis (MS), a disease of the central nervous system. This disease is typically slow and fitful in its progress, so it creates a myriad of effects that can range from relatively minor physical annoyances to major life threatening disabilities. Multiple Sclerosis seems to be triggered by an autoimmune reaction that for some reason causes the immune system to attack the myelin sheaths protecting the nerves, thus causing a short-circuiting in their electrical flow. The result can be chronic pain, weakness in the muscles, and ultimately tremors.

The initial attack of MS usually occurs between the ages of 20 and 40, and women are twice as susceptible to MS as men. Also, Caucasians are twice as susceptible to MS as African Americans. Moreover, MS is more prevalent in the northern regions of the world. In Canada, the rate of MS is twice as high as in the United States. In fact, statistics have shown that worldwide, there is a higher predisposition for people living above the 40° latitude to develop MS than those living below the 40° latitude. For the United States, this phenomenon shows that people living above 37° latitude, on a line from the North Carolina-Virginia border to mid-California, are twice as likely to develop MS as those living below the 37° latitude. These statistics also consistently show that people who move from one area to another either increase or decrease their risk of MS depending on the direction of their move and whether their move occurred before 15 years of age.

The first attack may be mild and brief, and may not even be recognized other than as a general sense of fatigue and muscle weakness. The symptoms temporarily disappear for reasons that aren't known, but recurrence is highly likely. However, it may take years until another recurrence. The initial onset may last days or months. Other recurrences may surface at erratic intervals making it difficult to diagnose. Although the myelin sheaths can normally self-repair, repeated inflammation of the nerves can cause the sheaths to disintegrate, impeding the flow of electrochemical messages to other parts of the body. If the disintegrated areas heal too fast, scarring occurs, forming lesions in the myelin sheaths rather than allowing the restoration of the sheaths themselves. This scarring is called sclerosis. Hence, the name Multiple Sclerosis refers to multiple lesions in the nerve sheaths.

The unpredictable tendency of MS and its broad spectrum of symptoms often make it difficult to diagnose until it progresses to the point that the myelin damage has been done.

There are basically four categories of MS:

Benign: These cases are usually limited to just one attack, and there is no permanent disability. The most common symptoms are muscle weakness, limb weakness, and inflammation of the optic nerve. About 20 percent of MS cases are benign.

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