

MARCH:

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS EDUCATION & AWARENESS

WHAT IS MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS?

Multiple sclerosis ("MS") is a chronic disease that affects the **central nervous system** ("CNS"), i.e., brain and spinal cord. In these tissues, nerve fibers are surrounded by a layer of insulation called **myelin**, which allows nerve signals to travel properly.

In MS, the myelin is destroyed on the brain and spinal cord. The resulting scar tissue interrupts nerve messages that communicate through the spinal cord to the brain. Scarring also damages the nerve fibers themselves causing permanent loss of function as well as damage to the cells that produce the insulation (myelin).

This is similar to a frayed electrical cord: the insulation assures that the electricity running along the wire reaches its destination. In MS, the nerve messages "short-circuit" or become absent, resulting in problems with vision, coordination, feeling in the limbs and other symptoms. The disease varies greatly from person to person, and may be described by **four classifications**:

Relapsing-remitting: specific attacks lasting from days to weeks, with full recovery or some remaining symptoms; periods between relapses are stable without worsening of the disease.

Secondary-progressive: begins with relapsing-remitting course that becomes consistently progressive, without recovery between attacks.

Primary-progressive: progresses steadily from the start, without any periods of relapse or remission (temporary, minor improvements may be experienced).

Progressive-relapsing: clear progress from the start, with relapses that may or may not include memory.

WHAT CAUSES MS?

Currently, the exact cause of MS remains unknown, but researchers believe that a combination of factors may be involved:

Immunologic reactions: MS is thought to be an auto-immune disease, when the body's defense system mistakenly attacks itself.

Viral or other infections: some research suggests that a common virus or other infectious germ may play a part in MS.

Environmental factors: scientists have learned that MS appears more frequently in certain geographic locations – more cases found farther from the equator (diet, industrial exposures or the content of water or soil may play a role).

Genetic factors: while MS isn't thought to be a hereditary disease: in a family where one parent has MS, the risk that the children will develop MS is estimated between 2 and 5 percent (living in the same environment or eating the same diet may be stronger factors within families)

Over the years, aspartame (artificial sweetener), allergies, physical injuries, exposure to heavy metals, and environmental toxins have been studied as potential causes to

MS, but little or no evidence is found to support those claims...**"the jury is still out!"**

WHO GETS MS?

There are currently 350,000-500,000 people in the U.S. who have been diagnosed with MS: 200 new cases are diagnosed each week and over 2½ million people live with MS worldwide. These numbers are only estimates, because physicians are not required to report new cases of MS to the CDC, and symptoms of MS may be unrecognized for some time...

- more common in women,
- appears more frequently in Whites than Hispanics, African Americans or Asians
- most commonly diagnosed between ages 20 and 50

SYMPTOMS OF MS

Common symptoms include fatigue, weakness, spastic movements and tremors, problems with balance, loss of bladder and bowel control, vision loss, and depression. Symptoms may be continuous or cease from time to time. Depending on the location of the "lesions" (scarring of the myelin), the symptoms will vary from person to person. Modifying activities, medications, physical and occupational therapy, diet management and counseling may make significant differences in delaying disability, so **early treatment has replaced the "wait and see" approach** to management of symptoms. Many people with MS also use complementary or alternative medical care with traditional therapies – work *with* your healthcare provider to find the right combination for you! Many people with MS continue to live active, productive lives and contribute greatly to their families and communities...



To help raise awareness and funds for research in MS, consider participating in a "WALK MS" event in your area: e.g., in southern California, these walkathons are scheduled for the month of April, 2010:

Apr. 10: UC/Irvine, Murrieta, Lancaster

Apr. 17: Rancho Cucamonga, Big Bear, Palm Desert

Apr. 18: Pasadena

Apr. 24: Westlake Village, San Diego

Apr. 25: Carlsbad

For more locations and dates, go to www.walkms.org

For more information about MS, go to

www.msfocus.org/

www.centerwatch.com/ctrc/MSFocus/index

www.nationalmssociety.org

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