

Health Tips

Your Good Health Information From eDocAmerica

with

Dr. D



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Health Tip: Seeking a Cure for Multiple Sclerosis

This week, the National Multiple Sclerosis Society hopes to raise awareness about MS, an incurable, debilitating disease of the central nervous system, through an educational campaign. Tragically, symptoms of MS usually begin in early adulthood and affects almost 400,000 people in the United States. Unless you have a friend or family member with MS, you may not know much about this disease. Today's Health Tip will look at the causes, clinical features and treatment of MS.

What causes MS? There is no known cause for MS. Many experts consider it to be an "autoimmune" disease, meaning that the body attacks itself. What causes the body to do this is not well understood but could relate to a number of factors including genetics, environmental triggers, or even viral infections.

How does MS affect the body? The name comes from the characteristic lesions that occur on the nerves of the central nervous system (brain and spinal cord). The term "sclerosis" relates to scarring of the myelin sheath, the tissue that surrounds nerve fibers and is crucial to their function. This scarring occurs in many locations along the course of the nerve, hence the term "multiple". When these lesions occur, normal nerve function is disrupted, which can result in a number of symptoms including:



- Visual disturbances---blurred vision, double vision or blindness in one eye
- Muscle weakness---enough to impair standing or walking
- Trouble with coordination and balance
- Sensations such as numbness, prickling, or "pins and needles"
- Thinking and memory problems

In most cases, MS starts out as a disease of "exacerbations and remissions". In other words, those affected will have flare ups (exacerbations) that are associated with typical MS symptoms, followed by symptom free periods (remissions). In another variant of MS, those affected will have a more persistent course, with progressive worsening of their symptoms.

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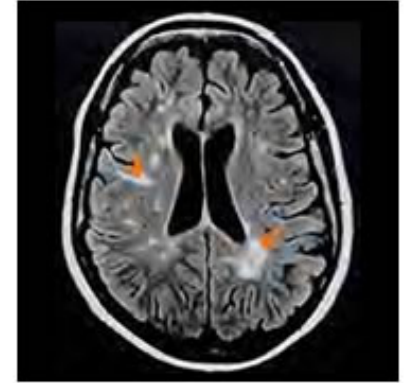


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How is MS diagnosed? Diagnosis of MS is primarily "clinical", meaning the doctor looks for characteristic signs and symptoms of the disease. Often, the disease is suspected by a primary care physician who refers the patient to a neurologist for a definite diagnosis. There are no blood tests available for making the diagnosis, but the clinical impression can be supported by finding typical features on a MRI of the brain or by performing a spinal tap and looking for specific proteins that are associated with the disease in the spinal fluid.



How is MS treated? Unfortunately, there is no cure for MS. Once MS develops, it is present for the rest of one's life. There are, however, treatments available that can slow down the progress of the disease or that can help with symptoms. Some patients do well with no therapy at all. For the type of MS that is characterized by periodic relapses, the disease modifying drugs, beta-interferon (Avonex, Rebif, Betaseron), glatiramer (Copaxone), natalizumab (Tysabri) and mitoxantrone (Novantrone) may be considered. Treatment of the more progressive type of MS includes the use of corticosteroid medications, muscle relaxers and physical therapy.

Want to learn more about MS? Advances in research and treatment are moving us closer to a cure for MS. For more information on this disease, including ways that you can help in the effort to seek a cure, visit the [National Multiple Sclerosis](#) website.

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