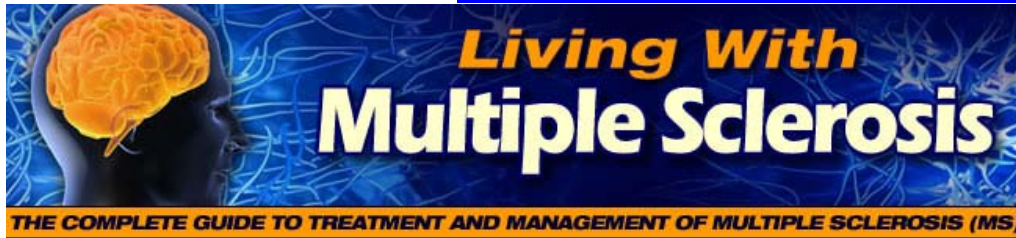


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Living With Multiple Sclerosis

By Piet Mesmer

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO TREATMENT AND
MANAGEMENT OF MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS (MS)

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About the Author

Piet Mesmer has friends and a close relative that are living with Multiple Sclerosis.

He wanted to learn about the condition because he heard so many conflicting theories and rumors. Few people were willing to discuss it and Piet felt that a guide to the subject could be helpful to others like him that dealt with people who had the disease and their families.

He hopes that many people will be able to use this layman’s guide as a starting point in their own search for knowledge, and to counter some of the “old wives’ tales” that circulate, discourage or frighten people whose lives are touched by Multiple Sclerosis.

Piet emphasizes that on-going research is bringing new information and hope into this area. People should always consult their own Doctors and other medical professionals about their condition and the best ways to manage and treat it.

Part-I: Introduction

1. Multiple Sclerosis – An Overview

Multiple sclerosis is a persistent and debilitating disease affecting the central nervous system (your brain, nerve cells and spinal cord). This inflammatory disease affects the patient’s mobility and can cause severe disability.

Some doctors and researchers believe that this is an autoimmune disease. That is where your immune system tries to defend against the normal activities of other parts of your body - your immune system attacks you.

The nervous system consists of neurons, brain, nerve cells and the spinal cord. They work together to carry information between the brain and other parts of your body.

Multiple sclerosis destroys the Myelin layer (a protective fatty layer around the neurons that carry those electrical signals). This disrupts the vital transfer of electrical signals across the spinal cord and brain. This scars the myelin sheaths. These scars prevent easy transmission of the signals. The intensity of the disease relates to the extent of the scarring and the resultant impact on the rate and quality of the transfer of the signals.

Incidence

There are around two and half million people in the world with multiple sclerosis. Around 350,000 people in the U.S.A. suffer from this disease. The disease most often starts between the ages of twenty and forty. Sometimes, it occurs a bit later.

It affects more women than men.

Another striking fact is that people living in the northern latitudes such as parts of Northern Europe and the Northern United States report higher incidence of the disease.

There are possibly genetic factors at work, too. Children whose parents or siblings have multiple sclerosis, have a greater chance of getting the disease.

The cause might be a virus that triggers a destructive reaction from your immune system.

Types and Symptoms of Multiple Sclerosis

The effects of Multiple Sclerosis vary and are grouped according to;

- the severity of the symptoms,
- the frequency of attacks,
- the level of damage, and
- the ability of your central nervous system to recover.

Accordingly, multiple sclerosis (MS) could be:

- Relapsing-remitting MS,
- Relapsing progressive MS,
- Secondary progressive MS, or
- Primary progressive MS.

Common symptoms of the disease may include;

- partial loss of vision or total loss of vision in one eye,

- double vision,
- general weakness,
- change in sensation of hands, legs, and face,
- unsteady walking with acute balance problems.

These symptoms may not show to a great degree in some cases. Also, they may come and go.

Many people only notice mild effects in the early stages which they either ignore or do not ask their doctor about.

Sometimes, trauma, infection, or severe physical exhaustion could trigger the symptoms of MS.

Some patients are affected by the symptoms of multiple sclerosis from time to time, but are perfectly normal between attacks, with perhaps a few neurological problems that persist permanently.

The exact cause of multiple sclerosis is still unknown. Treatments can slow down the appearance of new symptoms but there is no permanent cure for the disease right now.

Part-II: Understanding Multiple Sclerosis

2. What is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple Sclerosis is a complex, chronic, inflammatory disease of the central nervous system. It is a degenerative disease that gradually destroys the myelin sheath and thus causes weakness to the muscles, loss of speech and visual coordination.

The myelin sheath is a fatty layer that surrounds and protects the neurons which carry messages (electronic signals) between the brain and other parts of the body. The role of the myelin is important.

The damage to the myelin causes symptoms of different intensity in sufferers. Multiple sclerosis is divided into two groups according to this intensity and frequency. They are the relapsing-remitting type and the chronic-progressive type.

Chronic-progressive Multiple sclerosis is again divided into primary-progressive, secondary-progressive and progressive-relapsing types.

Repeated attacks may occur along the brain and the spinal cord area, with symptoms lasting from a few days to months. It makes the body work erratically.

Your natural antibodies, white blood cells, work against the myelin sheath. There is inflammation and injury to the sheath, which ultimately causes injury to the nerves it protects. This results in the scarring of multiple areas, which gives multiple sclerosis its name.

This scarring slows and blocks the nerve signals, which are essential to control muscle coordination, strength, vision, and sensation.

Multiple sclerosis is likely to affect the young adult between the ages of 20 to 40. It affects twice as many women as men.

The cause of the disease may be a defect in the immune system, either of genetic or viral origin. Geographical studies indicate a greater prevalence of this disease in northern Europe, northern United States, southern Australia, and New Zealand.

At present, the actual cause, or the trigger for this disease is unknown. This makes effective treatment very difficult. However, the fact that it is not a life threatening disease brings some relief. With the help of current treatments, a patient's multiple sclerosis can be controlled to a fair degree so that many of them can lead an active and normal life.

3. The Immune System and Multiple Sclerosis

Immune System

There are about 60 trillion cells in the human body. This is an excellent environment for microbes to grow in and live happily. Most microbes do not cause any trouble for us. In fact, some are very beneficial and help us digest our food.

However, some microbes (known as the pathogens) can cause our body much trouble and even prove fatal. The immune system fights these harmful microbes.

Our immune system has two parts: the innate, or the natural system, and the acquired, or the specific, immune system. The cells from both these groups are equally involved in the damage caused by multiple sclerosis.

Relation between the Immune System and Multiple Sclerosis

When a person suffers from multiple sclerosis, the body cells invade their own tissues, treating them like their enemy in a war.

There is some evidence that indicates multiple sclerosis is an autoimmune disease. These are disorders of the immune system. The immune system is responsible for identifying the harmful invaders of the body and destroying them. A recent study focused on how the immune system reacts in the people with multiple sclerosis.

The study indicated that multiple sclerosis causes abnormalities in the immune system. The first evidence is the presence of white blood cells that react with the protein found in the myelin sheath.

Multiple sclerosis develops in individuals through viral or bacterial infection.

The second indicator is the presence of T-cells in the spinal fluid of people that have multiple sclerosis. When spinal fluids were further analyzed, IgG – protein was found in high quantity. Then electrophoresis showed oligoclonal banding, further supporting the autoimmune theory.

There are still are more questions than answers. At present there are three factors that different researchers believe are responsible for the disease; environmental factors, hereditary factors and a virus. Each of them have found significant acceptance amongst researchers.

What causes multiple sclerosis in an individual is still debatable, but the autoimmune theory comes closest to matching the results of the researches made to date.

Researchers believe that a pathogen that triggers the T-cells response is still not identified despite all the searches made.

No particular multiple sclerosis antigen has been found.

The other existing theory is nothing but a compilation of all the other facts about multiple sclerosis.

4. How Serious Is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis is a disease that may shorten a person's life span by six to seven years. Half the people that suffer from multiple sclerosis die because of its effects. Suicidal tendencies are also very high among people suffering from multiple sclerosis.

The severity is very unpredictable and the symptoms vary from person to person. This disease affects the central nervous system and the damage done to the nerves is extensive.

The major problems of multiple sclerosis are -

Fatigue: Fatigue is one of the most common symptoms of multiple sclerosis, affecting 75% to 90% of the patients. More than half of them experience fatigue on a daily basis. Poor control over the condition and the resultant acute sensitivity to physical sensation may be the main cause of stress with multiple sclerosis.

Loss of mobility and spasticity (stiffened muscles): Each person with multiple sclerosis loses control over their muscles and suffer spasticity where their muscles resist stretching. Spasticity is one of the main symptoms of multiple sclerosis. Mild spasticity may improve muscle toning in the legs, which supports the patients' leg while walking.

Pain: About two-thirds of people suffering from multiple sclerosis experience pain at some point of time. Multiple sclerosis may cause acute or chronic pain syndromes; cramps, spasms, optic neuritis pain, pain on the joints and the feeling of itching and burning.

Bowel, urinary and sexual dysfunction: Bowel dysfunction, like constipation, occurs in people with multiple sclerosis. This dysfunction may be due to medications. Two-thirds of the people suffering from multiple sclerosis also complain of urinary problems due to bladder dysfunction.

Another problem that occurs is sexual dysfunction. Both male and female patients may have problems in achieving sexual satisfaction.

Cognitive impairment: Most people with multiple sclerosis have trouble concentrating and focusing. The severity increases as the degree of damage done to brain tissue increases.

Depression: Around 40% to 60% of people suffering from multiple sclerosis suffer from depression. They sometimes commit suicide while depressed.

Osteoporosis: Osteoporosis (loss of bone density) occurs due to immobility and some medications. Fractures caused by falls in people with multiple sclerosis tend to be more serious than with people suffering from many other diseases.

Lung Problems: With the weakening of the muscles, there comes difficulty in coughing. The result of this may be a higher chance of getting pneumonia and other lung complications.

The Effects at a Glance:

1. Multiple sclerosis destroys the myelin sheath, the layer that protects the nerve cells.
2. It affects many body functions, including speech, memory, vision and body movements.

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