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Multiple Sclerosis Factsheet

What Can Science Do for Me?

This 5 x 30 minutes series of films takes five individuals each with a chronic health condition to meet the scientists working on treatment, prevention and diagnosis of their particular condition. The series was funded by the Wellcome Trust and made by Media Trust Productions.

Multiple Sclerosis – Michelle's Journey

Singer-song writer Michelle Mullen has Multiple Sclerosis, an unpredictable and disabling condition of the nervous system. This film follows her personal journey in search of information from some of the UK's leading scientists. Since developing MS five years ago, Michelle has had to give up her dreams of becoming a pop star. However, her hopes for the future increase as she obtains a better understanding of what MS does to the brain, the role genes play, what trigger factors might be involved and the promise that stem cells offer. Empowered by this new knowledge, Michelle begins to write a new song, the first since her relapse.

What is MS?

MS is the most common disease of the central nervous system affecting young adults. The central nervous system comprises the brain and spinal cord. Together with the nerves connecting to the rest of the body, they form the body's communication network.

Nerve cells (neurons) contain nerve fibres (axons), which are surrounded by a protective sheath of fatty protein called myelin. This protects the nerves in the same way that insulating material protects an electric wire. In MS, damage or scarring occurs to the myelin sheath. This damage (called demyelination) disrupts the way in which messages, or nerve impulses, are carried to and from the brain and so can interfere with a range of the body's functions.

The term 'multiple sclerosis' comes from 'sclerosis', which means 'scarring' and 'multiple', which relates to the sites of the scarring, which can occur in different places throughout the brain and spinal cord.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms depend on the position and extent of the scarring or lesions within the central nervous system and on how much damage has occurred, so no two people with MS will have exactly the same set of symptoms.

Common symptoms are:

- * fatigue
- * loss of vision in one eye
- * blurred or double vision
- * dragging a foot
- * weakness of limbs
- * reduced coordination
- * balance problems
- * numbness, pins and needles, burning sensations

In the earlier stages of MS, the central nervous system can often repair areas of damaged myelin or reroute messages via different pathways of neurons thereby avoiding the damaged areas. This explains why episodes of symptoms (relapses) can be followed by weeks, months or even years when symptoms improve or disappear (remission). However, if the area of damage becomes too large, communication with that specific part of the central nervous system may become permanently blocked.

What causes MS?

The cause of MS is not yet fully understood but is thought to be a combination of environmental and genetic factors. One theory is that some people have certain groups of genes that make them more likely to develop MS. It may be that an external factor, such as a virus, triggers a reaction in those with this genetic predisposition causing the immune system to malfunction and attack its own myelin.

Key facts

- * More than 85,000 people in the UK have MS
- * Recent studies suggest about three times as many women as men have MS
- * MS is not inherited, but family members do have a slightly higher risk of developing it
- * It is usually diagnosed when people are in their 20s and 30s
- * MS is a disease affecting the central nervous system (the brain and spinal cord)
- * Symptoms can come and go and can vary greatly in terms of severity
- * There may be periods of relapse of varying length and severity
- * Everyone's MS is different
- * MS is not a fatal condition, and it is neither infectious nor contagious
- * Most people diagnosed with MS will not need to use a wheelchair on a regular basis
- * At present, there is no cure for MS but this certainly doesn't mean that the symptoms of MS cannot be treated.

Organisations

Multiple Sclerosis Trust

The MS Trust is the source of health information for people living and working with multiple sclerosis. It provides information for anyone affected by multiple sclerosis, education programmes for health professionals, funding for practical research and campaigns for specialist MS services.

Address: Spirella Building, Bridge Road,



Letchworth Garden City, Herts SG6 4ET.
Tel: 01462 476700
Fax 01462 476710
Email: info@mstrust.org.uk
Website: <http://www.mstrust.org.uk>

Multiple Sclerosis Resource Centre

MSRC is a proactive and innovative charity, committed to supporting anyone affected by Multiple Sclerosis through access to unbiased information and advice.

Address: 7 Peartree Business Centre, Peartree Road,
Stanway, Colchester, Essex CO3 0JN
MS 24 Hour Tel. Counselling Service: 0800 783 0518
(then press 1)
Tel: 01206 505444
Fax: 01206 505449
Email: info@msrc.co.uk
Website: <http://www.msrc.co.uk/>



Multiple Sclerosis Society

The MS Society is the UK's largest charity for people affected by Multiple Sclerosis (MS) with 350 branches across the UK. The Society funds MS research, runs respite care centres, provides grants (financial assistance), education and training on MS. It also runs a Helpline.

Address: (England) MS National Centre, 372 Edgware Road, London, NW2 6ND
National Helpline: 0808 800 8000 (Open 9am-9pm, Mon-Fri, except bank holidays)
Tel: England: 020 8438 0700, Scotland: 0131 335 4050, Wales: 029 2078 6676,
Northern Ireland: 02890 802 802
Website: <http://www.mssociety.org.uk>

The Wellcome Trust

The Wellcome Trust was established in 1936 and is an independent charity funding research to improve human and animal health. It is the UK's largest non-governmental source of funds for biomedical research.

Address: Gibbs Building, 215 Euston Road, London NW1 2BE.
Tel: 020 7611 8888
Fax 020 7611 8545
Email: contact@wellcome.ac.uk
Website: <http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/>

Community Channel

Community Channel is a not-for-profit, free to air television channel in the UK launched in September 2000. Owned by the Media Trust, a registered charity, its remit is to give a voice to community groups, charities of all sizes and not-for-profit organizations through using news, current affairs, documentaries and lifestyle programming.

Web: <http://www.communitychannel.org/>

Tel: 08708 505500

Email: info@communitychannel.org

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