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Multiple Sclerosis

What Is Multiple Sclerosis?

Multiple sclerosis is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system (CNS), which consists of the brain and spinal cord. Symptoms of multiple sclerosis may be mild, such as numbness in the limbs, or severe, such as paralysis or loss of vision. The specific symptoms of multiple sclerosis and their rate of progression and severity vary from one person to another.

Multiple sclerosis is thought to be an autoimmune disease, which means that it is caused by an attack on the CNS by the body's own immune system. The attack results in damaged areas on the nerves that form scar tissue (sclerosis), which gives the disease its name. These areas of scar tissue result in distortion and/or interruption of impulses in the nerves that travel to and from the brain and spinal cord. This disruption of nerve traffic produces the variety of symptoms that can occur with multiple sclerosis.

Diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis

A diagnosis of multiple sclerosis cannot currently be determined by just symptoms, physical findings, or laboratory tests alone. Physicians instead use several tests and strategies combined in order to determine if a patient meets the diagnostic criteria of MS. These strategies include taking a careful medical history of the patient, performing a neurologic exam, and conducting various other tests, including magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), evoked potential (EP) tests, and spinal fluid analysis. The physician also uses these tests and strategies to rule out any other possible causes of the symptoms experienced by the patient.

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