

## Who gets MS?

**Chloe:** Who gets MS? Well, actually, that's quite a tricky question. There's a wide variety of people who have MS. For example, these people, they all have one thing in common. They have MS. I have MS, too, and often I do think; "Why me?". So what I've done is I've grilled Doctor Duddy, Doctor Martin Duddy to find out all the real facts. 'Cos he's a specialist and he's also my specialist, and he knows all things about MS.

**Martin:** I'm Martin Duddy. I'm a consultant neurologist with a special interest in Multiple Sclerosis. I work at the Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in the UK.

**Chloe:** What I really want to know is, are there many people like me?

**Martin:** So, MS is a relatively common illness. If we look world-wide, we'd estimate there is about two point five million people affected by the disease. In the UK alone, it comes out, we think, at about a hundred thousand people. And if we then start to look at children with MS, a recent estimate would suggest about two hundred and thirty children with MS in the UK and maybe, just at the minute, about fifty going through the diagnostic process at some point.

**Chloe:** Well, I didn't actually realise there was over two hundred children with MS who are just like me. I've heard that MS is more common in different parts of the world. Why is that? It's a bit weird.

**Martin:** So the, where you find MS varies depending on where you are in the world. It's more common, generally, the further north or the further south you go from the equator and less common in the warmer, sunnier places. Couple of theories as to why this may be, but I think now it seems to be probably due to vitamin D. That's a vitamin that is transformed in the skin on the effect of sunlight, become active and it certainly seems to be in parts of the world where people have higher vitamin D levels that there is less MS than in, kind of, cold, damp, cloudy places MS is a bit more common.

**Chloe:** So, less sunlight means a higher risk of getting MS. You mentioned something about genes. Does that mean, if my mum had it, would I get it?

**Martin:** People with MS have a genetic predisposition towards it. You often find it runs in families a little bit and about one in six people with MS may have a relative affected by it. However it's not a strictly genetic condition, like more common genetic things you'd think of. So the risk would be, if you have MS, at about a two per cent chance that a child would be affected with MS. But that's still quite low and often happens quite late in life.

**Chloe:** OK. So genes are a part of it too. But what about infections, and that? Can you catch it just like catching a cold?

**Martin:** So, MS is not an infectious disease. You can't pass it on to someone else, but there is a very intriguing relationship between some viruses and MS. We know that if you have a viral infection you are a bit more likely to have a relapse after it. So that's seems to be one rule and if we look particularly at the Epstein-Barr virus, which is the virus that causes glandular fever, most people with MS, or perhaps even everyone with MS, if we look hard enough, is evidence that they've had an infection with that some time in their lifetime.

**Chloe:** Thank goodness for that, then. So what you're saying is there's not really, like, one major cause of it.

**Martin:** There's no one cause for MS. You probably need to have a couple of things happen, perhaps in a particular order, for any one individual to develop MS. A particular nice illustration of this is, you can have an identical twin, and you might live in the same house, and one will get MS and, two out of three times, the other one, same genes, same parents, same food, get away without it. So it seems to be an unlucky series of events that happens in one individual that makes it happen.

**Chloe:** Thanks, Doctor Duddy. Here's, so here's some key facts you can remember. There are approximately two point five million people in the world who have MS. It's more common in women than men. Of the one hundred thousand people in the UK with MS, around two hundred and thirty of them are children. There isn't just one cause. Genes, germs, lack of sunlight. They all play a part in it, but, to be honest, it's, so, really a mystery. But, it's not anyone's fault. Like, if you, or anyone in your family have got it. It's a thing that happens. But it's, no one is to blame, so don't blame yourself or blame whoever's in it, who's ever got it in your family. You definitely don't have to go through this, alone.