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Epstein-Barr Virus May Be Risk Factor for Multiple Sclerosis

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Submitted by [Deborah Mitchell](#) on 2011-05-18

Although the cause of multiple sclerosis has evaded experts for years, scientists believe Epstein-Barr virus may be a risk factor for the disease. The Epstein-Barr virus belongs to the family of herpesviruses, which also includes herpes simplex viruses 1 and 2.

Environmental factors may trigger multiple sclerosis

People who have multiple sclerosis appear to be genetically predisposed to be susceptible to environmental factors that could trigger the disease. Among those possible triggers is Epstein-Barr virus, also known as human herpesvirus 4.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most people become infected with Epstein-Barr virus at some point during their lives. As many as 95 percent of people ages 35 to 40 have been infected in the United States. The virus also establishes a lifelong dormant infection in some immune system cells.

At the University of Granada, scientists analyzed the presence of the virus in 75 people with multiple sclerosis and 76 healthy controls. Specifically, they "determined the presence of antibodies to Epstein-Barr virus antigens synthesized within the central nervous system," the bodily system affected by multiple sclerosis. They also identified the presence of Epstein-Barr virus DNA and measured antibody levels to the virus within the central nervous system.

The study's authors found a statistically significant relationship between viral infection and some markers for multiple sclerosis; that is, markers that indicate a past infection were relevant while those that suggest recent or reactivated infection were not.

According to investigator Olivia del Carmen Santiago Puertas, while they found an association between multiple sclerosis and some viral infection markers, additional research using a larger patient population is necessary, "where the different viral infection markers are recorded, and assessing patients' clinical state even years before the onset of the first symptoms of multiple sclerosis."

Multiple sclerosis affects about 400,000 Americans and 2.5 million people around the world. Onset of the disease typically is between the ages of 20 and 50, and it is 2.5 times more common among women than men.

Other risk factors for multiple sclerosis include being Caucasian of northern European origin and family history of the disease. Environmental factors such as viruses, such as Epstein-Barr, have long been

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suspected of playing a role in the disease.

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