Multiple sclerosis prevalence in Ireland: relationship to vitamin D status and HLA genotype

R Lonergan, K Kinsella, P Fitzpatrick, J Brady, B Murray, C Dunne, R Hagan, M Duggan, S Jordan, M McKenna, M Hutchinson, N Tubridy

ABSTRACT

Background The relationship between prevalence of multiple sclerosis (MS) and latitude may be due to both genetic and environmental factors. The hypothesis that, in Ireland, MS prevalence is increasing and that north–south differences relate to variation in serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH)D) levels was tested in this study.

Patients and methods Patients and matched control subjects were identified in counties Donegal, Wexford, and South Dublin through multiple sources. Prevalence was determined. Blood samples were taken for serum 25(OH)D and serum intact parathyroid hormone measurement, and DNA was extracted.

Results Prevalence in 2007 was significantly greater in Donegal (northwest) (290.3/105, 95% CI 262.3 to 321.7) compared with 2001 (184.6/105, 162 to 209.5). In Wexford (southeast), there was a non-significant increase in prevalence in 2007 compared with 2001. Prevalence was significantly higher in Donegal than in Wexford (144.8/105, 126.7 to 167.8, p<0.0001) and South Dublin (127.8/105, 111.3 to 148.2, p<0.0001).

Overall, mean 25(OH)D levels were low and did not differ between patients (38.6 nmol/l) and controls (38.4 nmol/l). However, significantly more patients than controls had 25(OH)D levels <25 nmol/l (deficiency) (p=0.004).

Levels of 25(OH)D (mean 50.74 nmol/l) were significantly higher in South Dublin (area with lowest prevalence) (p<0.0001) than in Donegal or Wexford. HLA DRB1*15 occurred most frequently in Donegal (greatest MS prevalence) and least frequently in South Dublin.

Conclusion Vitamin D deficiency is common in Ireland. Latitudinal variation in MS prevalence probably relates to an interaction between genetic factors and environment (25(OH)D levels), and MS risk may be modified by vitamin D in genetically susceptible individuals.

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies support the hypothesis that multiple sclerosis (MS) is a multifactorial autoimmune disease arising from a complex interplay between genetic and environmental factors. The HLA-DRB1*1501 allele appears to be the predominant risk allele in northern European populations and the HLA DRB1*1501-DQB1*0602 haplotype confers greatest susceptibility to MS in Ireland. More recently, linkage to other candidate genes has been demonstrated, including interleukin-2 receptor alpha (IL2-RA), IL7-RA, EVI5 (ectropic viral integration site 5) and interferon alpha receptor. Many environmental factors have been implicated in the aetiology of MS and may interact with genetic susceptibility. The role of the environment is supported by the distinctive geographical distribution of MS, with the greatest incidences recorded at high latitudes north and south of the equator. It is proposed that the latitudinal variation in MS prevalence is inversely related to sunshine exposure and associated vitamin D production. The hypothesis regarding the environmental contribution of vitamin D is supported by migration studies which demonstrate an association between place of early residence and MS. Geospatial analysis in North America and continental USA showed a strong negative correlation between MS distribution and ultraviolet B (UV-B) exposure. During winter at high latitudes, sun exposure does not generate any vitamin D and thus vitamin D insufficiency is common. Lower 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH)D) levels during relapses, in addition to blunted parathyroid hormone (PTH) response, suggest that activated vitamin D may have immunomodulatory effects and influence disease activity. Activated vitamin D inhibits CD4+ T cell and myelin basic protein specific IL17 secreting T cell proliferation. Clinically, this is supported by seasonal fluctuation in the number of relapses and gadolinium enhancing lesions on MRI.

Few studies on the therapeutic effects of vitamin D in relapsing–remitting MS have been performed. There is no international consensus on optimal 25(OH)D levels or recommended daily intake, and the precise timing of vitamin D action, whether a discrete period or ongoing, remains unknown. Recent reports suggest that MS prevalence is increasing worldwide. The variation in prevalence with latitude was previously demonstrated in Ireland which at 53° North lies in a high risk MS zone where there is minimal skin production of vitamin D between late October and late March due to attenuation of UV-B rays. Based on previous Irish studies, we know that genetic factors contribute to MS susceptibility but vitamin D may influence risk. We hypothesised that: (1) the latitudinal gradient in MS prevalence persists in Ireland and (2) greater MS prevalence at higher latitudes relates to lower 25(OH)D levels compared with southern areas and (3) serum 25(OH)D is lower in patients with MS than in healthy controls.

Our aims were to (1) compare the prevalence of MS in three areas in Ireland (two rural areas: counties Donegal (northern latitude) and Wexford (southern latitude); and one urban area: southeast Dublin city (intermediate latitude), (2) determine differences in serum 25(OH)D and PTH levels between MS patients in the three regions and
RESULTS

Prevalence

In total, 652 MS patients were identified in the three regions: 329 in Donegal, 173 in Wexford and 150 in South Dublin (table 1). MS prevalence on 31 December 2007 was: Donegal 290.3/10^5 (95% CI 238.7 to 255.5), Wexford 144.8/10^5 (95% CI 138.3 to 151.9) and southeast Dublin 127.8/10^5 (95% CI 151.6 to 146.7). Prevalence was significantly higher in Donegal than in Wexford (p <0.0001) (see figure 1). Although the prevalence in Wexford was higher than that in South Dublin, this did not reach significance (p=0.72).

Age standardised MS prevalence was: Donegal—all MS patients 257.8/10^5 (95% CI 253.2 to 262.4), male MS patients 157.6/10^5 (95% CI 152.7 to 162.6) and female MS patients 358.3/10^5 (95% CI 350.3 to 366.5); Wexford—all MS patients 152.0/10^5 (95% CI 148.4 to 155.6), male MS patients 119.0/10^5 (95% CI 114.8 to 125.4) and female MS patients 176.0/10^5 (95% CI 170.4 to 181.7); southeast Dublin—all MS patients 125.2/10^5 (95% CI 120.0 to 126.4), male MS patients 84.2/10^5 (95% CI 80.6 to 87.9) and female MS patients 160.6/10^5 (95% CI 155.2 to 166.1). The three counties were significantly different from each other when comparing age standardised prevalence in all MS patients (p<0.001), in males with MS (p<0.001) and in females with MS (p<0.001).

In Donegal, MS prevalence had increased significantly since 2001; prevalence was 184.6/10^5 in 2001 (95% CI 162.0 to 209.5) and 290.3/10^5 in 2007 (95% CI 238.7 to 255.5) (p<0.001). There was a non-significant increase in prevalence in Wexford; prevalence was 120.7/10^5 in 2001 (95% CI 100.6 to 143.8) and 144.8/10^5 in 2007 (95% CI 138.3 to 151.9) (p=0.117). Prevalence was lowest in southeast Dublin (130.0/10^5 in 2007) but we did not have previous data for comparison (table 2). We could not compare age standardised prevalence rates over time because these data were not included in the 2001 prevalence study.

Overall, the female to male ratio in MS patients was 2.0:1. In Wexford, the ratio was 1.5:1 (2.2 in 2001), in Donegal 2.1:1 (2.48 in 2001) and in southeast Dublin 2.6:1 (no earlier data).

25(OH)D and PTH levels

Levels of 25(OH)D and PTH were determined in 539 MS patients (61.3% of all ascertained patients) and 226 healthy control subjects (table 3).

The mean level of serum 25(OH) D was similar in MS patients (38.6 (SD 22.5) nmol/l) and controls (36.4 (SD 16.4) nmol/l; p >0.05). Mean 25(OH)D levels in patients in Donegal were 36.9 nmol/l (range 13–97), in Wexford 39.7 nmol/l (15–114) and in southeast Dublin 50.7 nmol/l

Table 1: Demographic data of multiple sclerosis patients ascertained in each region of Ireland on 31 December 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Donegal</th>
<th>Wexford</th>
<th>South Dublin</th>
<th>Overall</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean age (years)</td>
<td>46.7</td>
<td>47.9</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>48.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Range)</td>
<td>(21–80)</td>
<td>(20–75)</td>
<td>(27–99)</td>
<td>(20–80)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F:M ratio</td>
<td>2.1:1</td>
<td>1.5:1</td>
<td>2.6:1</td>
<td>2.0:1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS duration (years)</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Range)</td>
<td>(1–54)</td>
<td>(2–49)</td>
<td>(1–53)</td>
<td>(1–54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relapsing remitting MS (%)</td>
<td>53.3</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>53.1</td>
<td>51.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary progressive MS (%)</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>39.2</td>
<td>39.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean age MS onset (years)</td>
<td>31.6</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>32.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Range)</td>
<td>(8–64)</td>
<td>(14–54)</td>
<td>(16–61)</td>
<td>(8–64)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean EDSS</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Range)</td>
<td>(0–9)</td>
<td>(0–9)</td>
<td>(0–9)</td>
<td>(0–9)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MS, multiple sclerosis; EDSS, Expanded Disability Status Scale.
and Wexford 39.7 nmol/l; p levels in patients in Donegal and Wexford (Donegal 36.9 nmol/l and PTH levels in MS patients (r ¼ 0.76).

There was no signiﬁcant difference between 25(OH)D and PTH in control subjects with 25(OH)D <25 nmol/l (r ¼ 0.47; p=0.0013) indicated a normal response to vitamin D deficiency.

Overall, signiﬁcantly more patients (18.2%) than controls (11.5%) were taking vitamin D supplementation of >800 IU/day (800–1500 IU/day) (p=0.04) but there was no signiﬁcant difference in proportions of patients (5.7%) and controls (8.6%) taking vitamin D supplementation of 1300–1500 IU/day (p=0.05). None of the cohort took >1500 IU vitamin D supplementation/day.

We stratified serum 25(OH)D results, looking separately at patients and controls not taking vitamin D supplementation. Mean serum vitamin D level was similar in patients (58.4 nmol/l) and controls (57.7 nmol/l) after stratiﬁcation (p>0.05). There was no signiﬁcant difference in mean 25(OH)D levels between patients (41.0 nmol/l) and controls (58.4 nmol/l) who were taking up to 800 IU vitamin D/day (p>0.05). The difference was signiﬁcant only in those with very low levels (‘deﬁciency’ <25 nmol/l), as before, with a greater proportion of MS patients having very low levels (p=0.004).

Mean serum 25(OH)D levels overall (patients and controls) were signiﬁcantly lower in those taking no supplements or <800 IU vitamin D/day (58.1 nmol/l) than in those taking >800 IU/day (55.1 nmol/l) (p<0.001). Mean serum 25(OH)D were also signiﬁcantly lower in those taking no supplements or <1000 IU vitamin D/day (59.9 nmol/l) than in those taking 1000–1500 IU/day (47.9 nmol/l) (p=0.05). Vitamin D supplement data are displayed in table 4.

Although we did not observe signiﬁcant relationships between serum 25(OH)D levels and age at MS onset (p=0.26) or the presence of relapse in the previous 2 years (p=0.7), our data were underpowered to address questions regarding these factors or to comment on any association between MS risk and season of birth, early sun exposure (2 h or more of daily summer sun exposure in childhood; p=0.21) or vitamin D supplementation (current or up to age 15 years; p=0.76).

Frequency of HLADRB1*15 allele

The HLADRB1*15 allele was present in 62.9% of MS patients compared with 35.2% of control subjects (p<0.01). The frequency was signiﬁcantly higher in Donegal patients (69%) than in Dublin, the area with the lowest MS prevalence, than in Donegal (p=0.0001) and Wexford (p<0.0001).

There was no signiﬁcant difference between mean 25(OH)D levels in patients in Donegal and Wexford (Donegal 36.9 nmol/l and Wexford 59.7 nmol/l; p=0.284). The proportion of MS patients from all three study areas with vitamin D deﬁciency (<25 nmol/l) (28.3%) was signiﬁcantly higher than the proportion of control subjects (19.2%) (p=0.004).

There was a signiﬁcant inverse correlation between 25(OH)D and PTH levels in MS patients (r ¼ 0.7). Our data were not underpowered to examine these factors or to comment on any association between MS risk and season of birth, early sun exposure (2 h or more of daily summer sun exposure in childhood; p=0.21) or vitamin D supplementation (current or up to age 15 years; p=0.76).

Table 2 Population and multiple sclerosis prevalence data in Donegal, Wexford and South Dublin in 2001 and 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region (latitude)</th>
<th>Census 1996*</th>
<th>MS cases 2001</th>
<th>Census 2006*</th>
<th>MS cases 2007</th>
<th>Age standardised prevalence rates: all MS cases</th>
<th>Age standardised prevalence rates: males</th>
<th>Age standardised prevalence rates: females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donegal (54° 8’ – 55° 43’</td>
<td>129 994</td>
<td>240 prevalence: 184.6/105 (95% CI 162.0 to 209.5)</td>
<td>113 347</td>
<td>329 prevalence: 290.3/105 (95% CI 238.7 to 355.5)</td>
<td>257.8/105</td>
<td>157.6/105</td>
<td>358.3/100 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wexford (52° 2’ – 52° 44’</td>
<td>104 372</td>
<td>126 prevalence: 120.7/105 (95% CI 100.6 to 143.8)</td>
<td>119 442</td>
<td>173 prevalence: 144.8/105 (95% CI 139.3 to 151.9)</td>
<td>152.0/105</td>
<td>119.0/105</td>
<td>176.0/100 000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dublin CCA 1 (53° 17’</td>
<td>127 146</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>101 721</td>
<td>130 prevalence: 127.8/105 (95% CI 131.6 to 146.7)</td>
<td>123.2/105</td>
<td>84.2/105</td>
<td>160.6/100 000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Central Statistics Office.
CCA 1, community care area 1 (Health Service Executive); MS, multiple sclerosis.
compared with South Dublin patients (52%) (p<0.04). Homozygosity for the HLA-DRB1*1501-DQB1*0602 haplotype occurred significantly more frequently in Donegal compared with Wexford (p=0.032).

**DISCUSSION**

In keeping with recent epidemiological studies of MS, we have observed an increase in the prevalence of MS nationally between 2001 and 2007, with a significant increase in the most northerly region of Donegal. We confirmed the latitudinal gradient found in 2001, with a significantly greater MS prevalence in the Northwest compared with the Southeast. This latitudinal gradient has been attributed to genetic factors, based on ancestral differences in each area (Celtic in the Northwest and Anglo-Norman in the Southeast) and the heterogeneity in distribution of HLA class II associations (specifically the HLA DRB1*1501–DQB1*0602 haplotype) in between these areas. The ethnic makeup of the study cohort was relatively homogeneous. Although Dublin county has experienced significant migration over the past decade, the particular area studied is not an area of marked migration, and population ethnicity was comparable with both Donegal and Wexford. Increased prevalence may be influenced by numerous factors in addition to increased incidence but our case ascertainment and diagnostic techniques have not changed greatly since the last prevalence study in 2001. Incidence could not be calculated due to inability to ascertain year of (MS) onset data in all identified cases. These particular cases were identified from at least two sources but exact timing of MS onset was not clearly recorded and patients declined interview.

Our study hypothesis is based on the idea that serum vitamin D levels in adulthood, after MS has presented, are relevant, or at least reflect what has happened previously, a limitation imposed by the nature of our study. Evidence from monozygotic (MZ) twin studies in MS supports the hypothesis that MS is strongly influenced by environmental factors in genetically susceptible individuals, that vitamin D levels are genetically regulated and that MS itself is not the cause of low vitamin D (eg. limited sun exposure imposed by indoor lifestyle). Adoptee studies and half sibling studies indicate that the environmental component is ubiquitous, rather than limited to the shared family environment. However, the exact timing of vitamin D action, and whether adult levels reflect those in the past, is as yet unknown. Chronic low concentrations, seasonal fluctuation or acute effects may all increase risk, and this limits our ability to draw clear conclusions. Insufficient pre- and perinatal vitamin D levels may imprint on functional characteristics of various tissues, increasing the risk of adult onset MS by interacting with other genetic susceptibility factors and adult exposures (including hypovitaminosis D during adult life).

MS displays a month of birth effect, with an excess of patients being born in spring and a deficit in winter; the effect is most pronounced in familial cases, implicating interactions between genes and environment related to climate. A recent Scottish study showed a marked difference (50%) in MS risk between being born in April versus November, and this month of birth association implicates interaction of a seasonal risk factor with loci at or near HLA-DRB1, the region exerting the single strongest genetic effect in MS, during gestation or shortly after birth. Our study was not sufficiently powered to address month of birth. The nature of this timing of birth effect remains unknown but maternal vitamin D deficiency is one plausible candidate.

Although MZ twins share a common genotype, epigenetic differences may cause phenotypic discordance (including disease susceptibility). Examination of differences in DNA methylation and histone acetylation in a large cohort of MZ twins showed that, although epigenetically indistinguishable during the early years of life, marked differences in content and genomic distribution of 5-methylcytosine DNA and histone acetylation in older twins affected their gene expression portrait. The divergence of epigenetic modification patterns with age may be influenced by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, such as smoking and diet, and epigenetic drift may occur with ageing itself. Fragas showed that approximately one-third of twins studied displayed epigenetic differences in DNA methylation and histone modification, distributed throughout their genomes and impacting on gene expression. These markers were more distinct in older twins with different lifestyles, highlighting the role of environmental factors in modifying a common genotype to a different phenotype (eg. discordant MS onset in MZ twins). Environmental modulation of genetic information, by altering the pattern of epigenetic modifications, supports the environment–genetic interaction findings in our study, and suggests that adult exposures, including vitamin D levels, may play a role in both MS risk and disease modification, even if the critical exposure period began prenatally.

Despite our hypothesis that the prevalence gradient would relate to lower 25(OH)D in MS patients, 25(OH)D levels between the north (Donegal) and south (Wexford) were not significantly different and did not differ from control subjects; winter levels were low in all participants. It is important to remember that optimal levels remain undefined (and may be much higher than current laboratory reference ranges—for example, ≥100 nmol/l). Our view of sufficiency is arbitrary, and we cannot assume that all individuals require the same

### Table 3 Winter serum 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels, winter serum parathyroid hormone levels and HLA-DRB1*1501 frequency in multiple sclerosis patients and control subjects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MS overall</th>
<th>Controls overall</th>
<th>MS Donegal</th>
<th>MS Wexford</th>
<th>MS South Dublin</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean serum 25(OH)D (nmol/l)</td>
<td>38.57</td>
<td>36.41</td>
<td>36.90</td>
<td>39.71</td>
<td>50.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean PTH (ng/l)</td>
<td>41.07</td>
<td>42.04</td>
<td>42.92</td>
<td>39.94</td>
<td>38.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Range</td>
<td>14.90–321.70</td>
<td>5–131.50</td>
<td>13–97</td>
<td>18–90</td>
<td>8–39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with HLA-DRB1*1501</td>
<td>62.90</td>
<td>35.20 (p&lt;0.01)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

25(OH)D, 25-hydroxyvitamin D; HLA, human leucocyte antigen; MS, multiple sclerosis; PTH, parathyroid hormone.

### Table 4 Vitamin D supplement doses taken by multiple sclerosis patients and controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vitamin D3/day</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>400 IU</th>
<th>800 IU</th>
<th>1200–1500 IU</th>
<th>Total sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MS patients (n) (%)</td>
<td>204 (62.0)</td>
<td>65 (19.8)</td>
<td>41 (12.5)</td>
<td>19 (5.7)</td>
<td>329 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controls (n) (%)</td>
<td>168 (74.3)</td>
<td>32 (14.2)</td>
<td>6 (2.6)</td>
<td>20 (8.9)</td>
<td>226 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of note, standard multivitamins, usually containing only 400 IU/day, are unlikely to alter serum levels of vitamin D.

IU, international units; MS, multiple sclerosis.
levels. However, mean winter levels in our Irish cohort were low overall (<50 nmol/l) and significantly more MS patients than controls had very low levels (<25 nmol/l). As previously described by others,2,15 there was a blunted FTH response only in MS patients with vitamin D deficiency (<25 nmol/l) but its meaning is unclear. Only a small percentage took >1000 IU vitamin D3 daily; maximum intake was <1500 IU but it is likely that at least 4000 IU daily are required to achieve levels of 100 nmol/l.35 Despite differences in solar radiation (UV-B) exposure between areas, the northwest of Ireland experiences on average 519 875 joules/cm² solar radiation annually compared with 331 683 joules/cm² solar radiation in the southeast44; it is probable that the latitudinal range in a small country such as Ireland is insufficient to demonstrate such an effect. Higher 25 (OH)D in southeast Dublin may be genetically regulated or relate to more widespread use of vitamin D supplements (39%) compared with Wexford (24%), and greater availability and consumption of fortified milk in Dublin.45 Differences in socioeconomic group distribution between these areas may influence supplementation practices.27 However, in 52% of patients and 59% of controls taking vitamin D3 supplements, the dose of >400 IU/day was unlikely to alter serum levels significantly.

The HLA DRB1*15 allele, associated with MS susceptibility, was significantly overrepresented in MS patients compared with controls, and HLA-DRB1*15 frequency was significantly lower in southeast Dublin compared with areas of higher MS prevalence. Active vitamin D (1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D) binds the intranuclear vitamin D receptor (VDR) whose gene locates to chromosome 12q15.1. The resulting complex binds the retinoid X receptor (RXR), resulting in a VDR–RXR complex, which then binds the vitamin D response element (VDRE).46 Recently, a VDRE was found on HLA DRB1*1501, the major MS susceptibility allele. Insufficient HLA DRB1*1501 expression in the setting of low vitamin D and suboptimal binding to the VDRE, with poor upregulation of HLA DRB1*1501—could affect central deletion of autoreactive T cells. Thus people possessing HLA DRB1*1501 may be at high risk of autoimmunity (MS) in the setting of vitamin D deficiency and this combination may explain the high prevalence of MS in the Irish population.

The latitudinal variation in MS in Ireland is not explained by 25(OH)D levels alone but most likely the interaction with genetic susceptibility. In a gene—environment interaction, lacking either component can prevent clinical expression of disease, leaving one factor apparently unrelated to risk when both are required. Therefore, similar overall serum 25(OH)D levels in patients and controls does not outlaw the role of low vitamin D in MS pathogenesis in our cohort.

In addition to the previously discussed limitation imposed by the nature of our study (ie, hypothesis based on the idea that serum vitamin D levels in adulthood are relevant in MS), we acknowledge that inclusion of spouses as controls is not always ideal, as they are usually in the same environment as affected cases and may modify their risk by taking vitamin D supplements more readily. However, we found that significantly more patients (18.2%) than controls (11.5%) were taking vitamin D supplements (≥800 IU) (p=0.04), despite this potential spousal influence. Spousal controls were included because they were more willing to give samples than people without affected family or partners.

In conclusion, although unproven, one might hypothesise that combined high frequency of HLA-DRB1*15 and widespread vitamin D insufficiency may explain the high, increasing MS prevalence in the Irish population. Vitamin D may only be one factor in a common mechanism by which environment interacts but it is a potentially modifiable risk. Vitamin D insufficiency is common throughout the population, an important public health observation. The MS prevalence gradient in Ireland is not explained by variation in 25(OH)D levels alone but differences in the frequency of the MS risk allele HLA-DRB1*1501 and risk haplotype HLA-DRB1*1501-DBB1*0602 combined with low serum vitamin D levels probably influence latitudinal variation.

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Funding MS Ireland contributed funds towards the study. Competing interests None. Ethics approval This study was conducted with the approval of the ethics committee of St Vincent’s University Hospital, Dublin, Ireland. Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

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Low vitamin D linked to higher MS rates in north of Ireland

Low levels of vitamin D, combined with genetic factors, may help to explain higher rates of multiple sclerosis in northern areas of Ireland, a new study reports.

What do we know already?
Researchers have long known that multiple sclerosis (MS) is more common in areas that are farther from the equator. In the British Isles, for example, the disease is more common in northeast Scotland and the Orkney and Shetland Islands. It is also more frequent in the north of Ireland than in the south. No one knows for certain why MS rates vary by latitude, but both genetic and environmental factors probably play a role. An MS-linked gene called the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele, for example, is more common among people in northern European countries. And one possible environmental factor is the lower levels of sunlight in areas further from the equator.

Our bodies need ultraviolet B light from the sun to produce vitamin D. Researchers are only beginning to understand the wide-ranging effects vitamin D has on the body, but it’s notable that people living further north often have low levels of this nutrient. It’s possible that low vitamin D might trigger MS in people genetically prone to the disease.

To explore the possible link with vitamin D and MS, the new study looked at people living in three areas of Ireland: Donegal, which is in the north; Wexford, which is in the south; and southeast Dublin, which is in the middle. The researchers took blood samples from people with and without MS to check their vitamin D levels and whether they had the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele. They also used data from the most recent Irish National Census to find out how common MS was in the three areas studied.

What does the new study say?
Not unexpectedly, people in Donegal were more likely to have MS than those in the areas further south.

When the researchers looked at all the areas together, they found that average vitamin D levels were similar for people with and without MS. However, the percentage of people with very low vitamin D was higher among those with MS (28.3 per cent) than among those without the disease (19.2 per cent).
The findings were similar when the researchers took into account whether people were taking vitamin D supplements or not. Looking at the areas individually, the researchers found that people in southeast Dublin had higher levels of vitamin D, on average, than people in Donegal and Wexford. Southeast Dublin also had the lowest rate of MS. On the genetics side of the equation, 62.9 per cent of people with MS had the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele, compared with only 35.2 per cent of people without the disease. The frequency of this gene was higher among people with MS in Donegal (69 per cent) than among those in Wexford (63 per cent) and southeast Dublin (52 per cent). Taken together, these finding suggest that both genetic factors and vitamin D levels may play a role in higher rates of MS in the north of Ireland.

How reliable are the findings?
This was a well-designed study, and its results should be fairly reliable. However, this type of study can't show cause and effect. So although low levels of vitamin D were more common in people with MS, it's not clear whether this actually played a role in their disease. For example, it's possible that some people had normal vitamin D levels when they developed their disease. We also can't be certain whether these findings apply to people living outside of Ireland.

Where does the study come from?
The study was conducted by researchers in Dublin. It received funding from MS Ireland.

What does this mean for me?
This study suggests that low vitamin D, along with genetic factors, may increase the risk of MS. Although there's nothing you can do about the genes you're born with, your vitamin D level is something you can change, by getting more sunshine, eating more vitamin D-rich foods or taking supplements. Whether this might lower your risk of MS is not yet clear. However, we do know that vitamin D is important in other respects, such as maintaining strong bones.

What should I do now?
If you're concerned about your vitamin D level, talk to your doctor. A simple blood test can tell you whether your level is low.
