

Information for patients from JNNP

Pregnancy may be good for women with MS

Having children may benefit women with multiple sclerosis, new research shows. The study found that women who gave birth after being diagnosed with MS were more likely to be able to walk unaided, many years after their diagnosis.

What do we know already?

If you have multiple sclerosis, the nerves in your brain and spinal column slowly lose their protective coating. This means your nerves get damaged over time, which can have a number of effects. The most common symptoms are feeling very tired and weak, and having areas of numbness or tingling. Multiple sclerosis symptoms tend to come and go. This is referred to as 'relapsing and remitting' MS. But when you've had MS for several years, it may become 'secondary progressive'. This means your symptoms don't go away completely after a relapse, and start getting worse over time. Most people get secondary progressive MS within 25 years.

Most people's MS gets worse and has more effect on them over the years.

Not everyone needs a wheelchair, although some people do eventually.

Others are able to walk for short periods, or may use a walking frame.

Twice as many women as men get multiple sclerosis, and it's most commonly diagnosed in women aged 20 to 40. For many women, these are the years they plan to get pregnant and have families. Previous studies have found that women tend to have fewer relapses of MS during pregnancy, but more in the three months after they give birth. However, there's been little research about the long-term effect of pregnancy on how MS develops. Researchers think that pregnancy hormones may protect against multiple sclerosis relapses in some way.

This latest study looked at long-term records from 330 women treated at one clinic for MS. Some had no children, some had children born before they were diagnosed, and some had children born after they were diagnosed. The study looked at whether women were able to walk 100 metres without using a cane, crutch, or brace.

What does the new study say?

Women who'd had children, especially those who'd had children since their diagnosis, were about 40 percent more likely to be able to walk 100 metres

unaided, 18 years after diagnosis. Having children seemed to slow down the progression of the disease. The women with children who needed help walking by the end of the study, had been able to walk unaided for longer than women without children. About 55 percent of all women needed help walking, 18 years after diagnosis.

How reliable are the findings?

The study is based on results from more than 300 women, and is likely to be reliable. However, it's possible that women who had worse MS at the start of the study were less likely to choose to have children after diagnosis, either because they didn't feel well enough or because they worried about their ability to cope with bringing up children. That might mean that faster-progressing disease caused women to be childless, rather than that having children slowed the progress of the disease.

Where does the study come from?

The study was done by researchers in Belgium and the Netherlands.

What does this mean for me?

Whether or not to have children is a big decision. It's even more difficult if you have a medical condition like MS. This study may help by showing that being pregnant or having children is unlikely to make your MS worse. It may slow down the rate at which your MS gets worse.

What should I do now?

Of course, deciding to have children is about a lot more than the effect it will have on your health. No one else can say whether it's the right decision for you. But if you're concerned about how your MS may affect your ability to care for your children, talk to your doctor. He or she may be able to advise you about the likely progress of your illness.

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Long-term effects of childbirth in MS by M B D'hooghe, G Nagels, B M J Uitdehaag. *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery, and Psychiatry*. 2010;**81**: 38-41.
<http://jnnp.bmj.com/content/81/1/38.full>

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