



Multiple
Sclerosis
Society of
Canada

Société
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de la sclérose
en plaques



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Medical Update Memo

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MS experts estimate number of Canadians with MS is 55,000 to 75,000

SUMMARY

The Multiple Sclerosis Society of Canada, in consultation with Canadian experts in the epidemiology of MS, has announced a revision to the estimated number of Canadians who have MS. The MS Society now estimates that there are likely between 55,000 and 75,000 Canadians living with this unpredictable disease.

DETAILS

Since the 1980s, the MS Society of Canada has estimated the number of Canadians with MS to be approximately 50,000 based on a number of studies conducted at that time. More recently, several studies have found prevalence rates that are significantly higher than previously reported. Prevalence is the number of known cases existing at one time within a particular population (region, city or country). In MS, prevalence rates are usually classified as high (greater than 30 cases per 100,000 population), medium (between five and 29 cases per 100,000) and low (less than five per 100,000). Canada is known for having one of the highest rates of MS in world.

In October 2005, researchers at the University of Calgary reported in the journal Multiple Sclerosis that the overall weighted estimate of MS prevalence in Canada is 240 per 100,000 individuals. The researchers included Dr. Cynthia Beck, Dr. Luanne Metz, and Dr. Scott Patten, University of Calgary, and Lawrence Svenson, Alberta Health and Wellness. They used data from the Statistics Canada 2001 Canadian Community Health Survey (CCHS) to compare MS prevalence across regions at a single time point, taking demographics into account. (For more information about the study, see the MS Society medical update memo Study reports regional variation of MS rates across Canada. It is available at www.mssociety.ca under Research/ Research & Medical Library.)

The researchers also provided prevalence information by region: BC - 240 per 100,000; Prairie region - 340 per 100,000; Ontario 230 per 100,000; Quebec - 180 per 100,000; and Atlantic region - 350 per 100,000. The overall weighted estimate of MS prevalence in Canada was reported to be 240 per 100,000.

In addition, Dr. Virender Bahn and colleagues at Dalhousie University reported in 2005 on MS prevalence in Nova Scotia. Prevalence estimates from their work range from 158 to 218 per 100,000 with a best estimate in the upper range of 200 to 218 per 100,000.

The revision in the estimated range of MS in Canada came after a consultation with experts in epidemiology who are members of the MS Society of Canada Medical Advisory Committee. (Epidemiology is the study of disease patterns, which takes into account variations in geography, demographics, socioeconomic status, genetics, and infectious causes.) The experts examined the data from the new studies and concluded the estimated range of MS cases in Canada is from 55,000 to 75,000.

The revised numbers may suggest that the risk of MS is increasing in Canada, but they may also reflect improvements in diagnostic technology. Compared to even 10 years ago, magnetic resonance imaging technology has enabled neurologists to make a diagnosis of MS earlier in the course of the disease than in the past. In addition, parallel improvements in treatments and medical care for individuals living with MS have also resulted in many people living with the disease well into old age, pointed out Dr. Christina Wolfson. The professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at McGill University took part in the review. She noted the new studies should lead to further research to verify these findings and to identify the reasons for the apparent differences between regions.

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