

Multiple sclerosis is the most frequent debilitating neurological disease in young adults in North America and in western Europe. The diagnosis is generally made between 20 and 40 years of age, although onset may be earlier. It appears that more women than men have MS, the ratio being 3:2.

Epidemiological studies have shown that the prevalence of multiple sclerosis rises with increasing distance from the equator. High-frequency areas (prevalence higher than 30/100.000) are northern and central Europe, southern Canada, northern United States, New Zealand and southern Australia; low frequency areas include Asia and Africa, the Caribbean region, northern South America, Alaska and Greenland (Kurtzke, 1980). Within Europe, a higher prevalence has been found in the northern parts compared to the southern countries, although this gradient has become less prominent during the last decade (Minderhoud, 1999). The last years, a general increase prevalence of multiple sclerosis has been found at world wide level (Kurtzke & Wallin in Burks & Johnson, 2000). This is probably related to improved diagnostic means, especially with MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) techniques. The average prevalence of multiple sclerosis in Europe varies between 30 and 150 per 100.000 people (Minderhoud, 1999), with the total estimated number of people with MS in Europe to 315.000. The estimated number of people with MS in the world is 2.5 million.