Olga Krökki

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS IN NORTHERN FINLAND

EPIDEMIOLOGICAL CHARACTERISTICS AND COMORBIDITIES
OLGA KRÖKKI

MULTIPLE SCLEROSIS IN NORTHERN FINLAND
Epidemiological characteristics and comorbidities

Academic dissertation to be presented with the assent of the Doctoral Training Committee of Health and Biosciences of the University of Oulu for public defence in Auditorium 8 of Oulu University Hospital (Kajaanintie 50), on 10 June 2016, at 12 noon

UNIVERSITY OF OULU, OULU 2016
**Abstract**

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is the most frequent chronic inflammatory demyelinating disease of the central nervous system leading to neurological disability in young adults. Finland belongs to the high-risk areas of MS with continuously increasing of prevalence rates. In comparison to the general population, patients with MS have an increased risk of premature mortality. The extent of comorbidity rates and their role in the outcomes of MS have not been fully investigated.

The aim of this thesis was to evaluate the epidemiology and survival of MS in Northern Ostrobothnia. The neurological comorbidity and frequency of fractures in patients with MS were also investigated. All MS patients diagnosed in Oulu University Hospital during 1990–2010 were included in this study.

The prevalence of MS was 103/10^5; the mean overall incidence was 6.3/10^5. Women had a 2.3-fold higher MS incidence than men. The overall incidence figures were clearly affected by a pronounced increase among females. Neurological comorbidities were common in MS patients with 17.1% of patients suffering from some other neurological diseases in addition with MS. The most common diseases were migraine (10.4%) and epilepsy (4.7%). The prevalence of stroke was similar in MS patients compared to the general population, but the 21-year survival rate was significantly lower in MS patients who had suffered a stroke compared with those MS patients without stroke. MS patients experienced a high risk for fragility fractures especially vertebral fractures. The possibility of osteoporosis had been examined only 26% patients with fragility fractures and osteoporosis was detected in the majority.

The prevalence of MS in our cohort was similar to the Finnish average, but in the Seinäjoki area, the prevalence was double the national average. Although the increasing incidence of female MS has been confirmed also in other studies, the reasons for this phenomenon are unknown. The increased risk for fragility fractures may be associated with low D vitamin levels or pathogenesis of MS. These findings emphasize the role of comorbid diseases in disability and survival of MS patients and attention should be paid to these conditions also in clinical practice.

**Keywords:** comorbidity, disability, epidemiology, fracture, multiple sclerosis, neuroimmunology, osteoporosis
Tiivistelmä

MS-tauti on nuorten aikuisten yleisin etenevä ja usein työkyvyttömyyteentä hoitava neuroimmunologinen sairaus. Suomi kuuluu korkean riskin alueeseen ja maassamme on havaittu alueellisia eroja MS-taudin esiintyvyydessä. MS-taudin ennusteeseen vaikuttavia tekijöitä ei täysin tunneta, mutta luonnollisen kulun tutkimuksissa on havaittu, että MS-tauti lyhentää eliniän muuhun väestöön verrattuna. MS-tautia sairastavien potilaiden toimintakyvyn ja eliniän ennusteeseen vaikuttavista liitännäissairauksista on hyvin vähän tietoa.


MS-taudin esiintymys oli 103/105 ja ilmaantuvuus keskimäärin 6,3/105. Naisilla MS-taudin ilmaantuvuus oli 2,3-kertainen miehiin verrattuna. MS-taudin ilmaantuvuus lisääntyi 15 vuoden seurannassa, mikä selittyy MS-taudin ilmaantuvuuden kasvulla naisten keskuudessa. MS-taudin lisäksi 17,1 %:lla potilaista oli jokin muu neurologinen sairaus. Yleimmät sairaudet olivat migrenei (10,4 %) ja epilepsia (4,7 %). Neurologista liitännäissairauksista aiheutettu verenkiertohäiriön esiintymys oli yhtä suuri kuin väestössä yleensä, mutta sairastettu aieverenkiertohäiriö lisäsi merkittävästi MS-potilaiden kuolleisuutta. MS-tautia sairastavilla havaittiin kohonnut riski etenkin matalaenergisiin murtumiin, joista merkittävä osuus oli selkärangen nikamamurtumia. Matalaenergisen murtuman saaneista potilaista luuntiheyden mittaus oli tehty vain 26 %:lle, joista suurin osa oli todettiin osteoporosi.

Tutkimuksen perusteella MS-taudin esiintymys vastaa Suomen keskimääräistä esiintyvyyttä ja on noin puolet pienempi kuin Seinäjoen alueella, missä MS-taudin esiintyvyys on Suomen korkein. MS-taudin ilmaantuvuuden lisääntyminen naisten keskuudessa on havaittu myös muissa tutkimuksissa, mutta syy tähän ilmíoon on epäselvää. MS-taudia sairastavilla kohonnut murtumarisikko saattaa liittyä mataliin D-vitamiinipitoisuksiin tai MS-taudin patogeneesiin. Koska liitännäissairastuksen sekä luunmurtumien heikentävät MS-tautia sairastavan toimintakykyä ja lisäävät kuolleisuutta, tulisi näihin kiinnittää enemmän huomiota myös kliiniseissä työssä.

Asiastatut: epidemiologia, liitännäissairaus, luun murtuma, MS-tauti, neuroimmunologia, osteoporosi, toimintakyky
To my family
Acknowledgements

The present study was carried out in the Department of Neurology, Oulu University Hospital, and in the University of Oulu during the years 2008–2016.

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Finally, I send my loving thanks to my husband Erkki, a wonderful man, who sustained all my efforts with love and astonishing forbearance throughout these years. I send my loving thanks to our younger son, Matti, who makes my life full of sense. Dear Matti, I hope I can now spend more time with you and encourage you in all your plans as well as taking care of our beloved Erkki.

30.04.2016

Olga Kröikki
### Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATP</td>
<td>adenosine triphosphate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMD</td>
<td>bone mineral density</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>confidence interval</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>clinically isolated syndrome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CNS</td>
<td>central nervous system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSF</td>
<td>cerebrospinal fluid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIS</td>
<td>dissemination in space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIT</td>
<td>dissemination in time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DXA</td>
<td>dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAE</td>
<td>experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBV</td>
<td>Epstein-Barr virus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDSS</td>
<td>expanded disability status scale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEG</td>
<td>electroencephalography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENMG</td>
<td>electroneuromyography</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIO</td>
<td>glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HLA</td>
<td>human leukocyte antigen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTLV-1</td>
<td>human T-cell lymphotropic virus type 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IL</td>
<td>interleukin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ILAE</td>
<td>International League Against Epilepsy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRI</td>
<td>magnetic resonance imaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>multiple sclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NARCOMS</td>
<td>North American Research Committee on Multiple Sclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NMO</td>
<td>neuromyelitis optica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OUH</td>
<td>Oulu University Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PML</td>
<td>progressive multifocal leukoencephalopathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPMS</td>
<td>primary progressive multiple sclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RR</td>
<td>risk ratio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRMS</td>
<td>relapsing remitting multiple sclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPMS</td>
<td>secondary progressive multiple sclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UV</td>
<td>ultraviolet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHO</td>
<td>World Health Organization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred to throughout the text by their Roman numerals:


# Contents

Abstract

Tiivistelmä

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

List of original publications

Contents

1 Introduction

2 Review of the literature

2.1 Etiology and pathogenesis of multiple sclerosis

2.2 Clinical course and diagnostics of multiple sclerosis

2.2.1 Clinical course

2.2.2 Diagnostics of multiple sclerosis

2.2.3 Differential diagnosis of multiple sclerosis

2.3 Epidemiology of multiple sclerosis

2.3.1 The geographical distribution of multiple sclerosis

2.3.2 Sex ratio, prevalence and incidence

2.3.3 Survival in multiple sclerosis

2.4 Risk factors of multiple sclerosis

2.4.1 Genetic factors

2.4.2 Hygiene hypothesis and EBV infection

2.4.3 Vitamin D

2.4.4 Life style risk factors

2.5 Comorbidity in multiple sclerosis

2.5.1 General aspects

2.5.2 Physical comorbidity

2.5.3 Mental comorbidity

2.5.4 Neurological comorbidity

2.6 Osteoporosis and fractures in multiple sclerosis

2.6.1 General aspects

2.6.2 Osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis

2.6.3 Osteoporosis and vitamin D deficit

2.6.4 Osteoporosis and glucocorticoid use

2.7 Risk of fractures in patients with multiple sclerosis

3 Aims of the research

4 Subjects and methods
4.1 Location of the study population ............................................................. 43
4.2 Ethics ....................................................................................................... 43
4.3 Subjects ................................................................................................... 43
4.4 Neurological comorbidity ....................................................................... 44
4.5 Assessment of fractures ........................................................................... 45
4.6 Statistical methods .................................................................................. 45

5 Results ........................................................................................................ 49
5.1 Prevalence and incidence of multiple sclerosis in Northern Finland ............................................................. 49
5.2 Neurological comorbidities ........................................................................ 50
  5.2.1 Neurological comorbidities in general ........................................ 50
  5.2.2 Migraine ....................................................................................... 51
  5.2.3 Epilepsy ........................................................................................ 51
  5.2.4 Stroke ............................................................................................ 52
  5.2.5 Peripheral nervous system disorders ............................................ 52
  5.2.6 Movement disorders ....................................................................... 52
  5.2.7 Other neurological disorders ......................................................... 52
5.3 Survival in multiple sclerosis ................................................................... 53
5.4 Fractures and osteoporosis ....................................................................... 54

6 Discussion ..................................................................................................... 57
6.1 Prevalence and incidence of multiple sclerosis in Northern Finland ............................................................. 57
  6.1.1 Prevalence ..................................................................................... 57
  6.1.2 Incidence ........................................................................................ 58
6.2 Neurological comorbidities and their impact on survival ....................... 59
6.3 Low-energy fractures, osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis ..................... 61
6.4 Strengths and limitations of the study ..................................................... 62
6.5 Conclusions and future aspects ............................................................... 63

References ........................................................................................................ 65
Original publications .......................................................................................... 77
1 Introduction

Multiple sclerosis (MS) is the most common chronic inflammatory demyelinating disease of the central nervous system (CNS) leading to a neurological disability in young adults. The societal lifetime costs of MS per patient are higher than those associated with stroke or Alzheimer’s disease because of the long duration of the disease, the incapacitating effect on the working abilities of young adults. These are attributable to the patient’s physical disability, fatigue and comorbidity, the need for assistance in daily living, the expensive disease-modifying therapies and multidisciplinary health care (Pugliatti et al. 2006). In Finland, the mean total annual cost of MS was 46 994€; in fact, this value increases almost ten-fold as the disease progresses from an initial annual cost of 10 835€ (EDSS score = 0) up to 109 901€ (EDSS score = 8–9) (Ruutiainen et al. 2016).

MS affects more than 2.5 million persons worldwide and there are about 7000 MS patients in Finland. The geographical distribution of MS patients has been the subject of numerous studies originating from different countries. Finland is one of the high-risk areas of MS and furthermore the nation has a continuously increasing prevalence rate. The epidemiology of MS has been studied in southern, central and western parts of Finland. However, there is extensive variation in these epidemiological values between different parts of the country, though they do seem to be highest in the Seinäjoki area (Kinnunen et al. 1983, Sarasoja et al. 2004, Sumelahti et al. 2001, Tienari et al. 2004).

MS is a complex disease that is characterized by a high degree of heterogeneity in its clinical, radiological and pathological features as well as in the therapeutic response. The central pathological findings of MS are inflammation, demyelination, remyelination and neurodegeneration. However, the exact pathogenesis and aetiology of MS are also not fully understood. According to current understanding, both genes and environmental factors are involved in the etiology of MS. The majority of patients have relapsing-remitting disease course (RRMS); only about 10–15 % of patients will experience the primary progressive form of MS (PPMS) at onset (Miller et al. 2007). The typical course for RRMS includes the initial stages of relapse with either a full or partial recovery, followed by a relapse leaving a persistent deficit, and eventually secondary progressive disease (SPMS). Today there are about ten different licensed disease modifying agents for RRMS. All of these drugs reduce the frequency of new episodes but do not reverse already present deficits and have
debateable effects on the long-term development of disability and disease progression.

There are significant variations in the prognosis of MS. Approximately 50% of individuals diagnosed with RRMS will enter a progressive phase with increasing disability after 10 years and the majority of them will need help in walking 15 years after the onset of disease. However, 10% of patients are able to function well for 20 years or even more (Noseworthy et al. 2000). Patients with MS seem to have a lifetime expectancy which is 10 years lower than the general population (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 1994, Bronnum-Hansen et al. 2004b, Compston & Coles 2008, Grytten Torkildsen et al. 2008, Kingwell et al. 2012, Ragonese et al. 2010, Sadovnick et al. 1992). Although the reason for the variation in the prognosis and decreased survival may be due to MS itself, the presence of other comorbid diseases may also influence their survival time. There is increasing interest in elucidating the roles of co-morbidity with cancer, psychiatric, cardiovascular and neurological diseases in MS. The data which have been mainly based on national registers and findings are partly contradictory.

There is no previous epidemiological data from the northern part of Finland. The aim of the present work was to investigate the epidemiology of MS in Northern Finland and evaluate the neurological comorbidity of these patients. In addition, a further aim was to estimate the frequency of fractures in patients with MS.
2 Review of the literature

2.1 Etiology and pathogenesis of multiple sclerosis

The etiology of MS is still unknown. Based on epidemiological and genetic data and the immune pathogenesis of MS, three main theories i.e. the autoimmune, infective (viral) or neurodegenerative theories have been proposed as underpinning the etiology of MS (Milo & Kahana 2010, Gilden 2005, Kurtzke 2013, Stadelmann 2011).

The pathogenesis of MS is characterised by a cascade of pathobiological events, starting from focal lymphocytic infiltration and microglial activation, ultimately culminating in demyelination and axonal degeneration. Demyelination is a hallmark of MS; it occurs in white and grey matter lesions. Myelin-specific autoreactive lymphocytes (mainly CD4+T cells) from outside the CNS cross the blood-brain barrier, leading to the formation of new inflammatory demyelinating lesions. The activation of autoreactive CD4+T cells may require additional environmental triggers in genetically susceptible individuals. The inflammatory process finally leads to tissue damage within the plaque. However, some degree of remyelination is possible and this can repair damaged tissue. The cortex is also affected in the early stages of the disease, which leads to cortical demyelination, neurodegeneration and finally to cortical atrophy (Ciccarelli et al. 2014, Kamm et al. 2014, Lucchinetti et al. 2011).

In addition to T-cells, B cells are involved in the pathogenesis of MS (Krumbholz et al. 2012). In patients with MS, the proinflammatory effects of B cells are particularly predominant. A B cell follicle-like aggregation in the meninges of SPMS has been observed, evidence in support of the central role of B cells in damaging the grey matter. The activated microglia and macrophages are also involved in the formation of MS lesions since they release myeloperoxidase, which maintains an inflammatory cascade and causes tissue damage (van der Veen et al. 2009).

The production of reactive-oxygen species and nitric oxide from activated microglia and infiltrated macrophage could induce mitochondrial dysfunction within neurons and a glutamate –mediated excitotoxicity plays also a role in the pathogenesis of MS. (Campbell et al. 2011, van Horssen et al. 2012, Ciccarelli et al. 2014).
2.2 Clinical course and diagnostics of multiple sclerosis

2.2.1 Clinical course

Usually, MS patients have multiple neurological symptoms related to the localisation of demyelinating lesions in CNS. There are sensory symptoms (numbness and paraesthesia), optic neuritis and other visual symptoms, motor symptoms (pyramidal weakness in limbs, including an acute transverse myelitis), spasticity, problems with bladder control and sexual dysfunction, bowel symptoms, fatigue, cognitive impairment, dysarthria, dysphagia, action or intention tremor, ataxia of gait and trunk, neuropathic and musculoskeletal pain.

Two initial clinical subtypes of MS are distinguishable. Approximately 85% of patients have the relapsing-remitting MS (RRMS) form and the remaining 10–15% of patients suffer from primary progressive MS (PPMS).

A relapse defined as patient-reported or objectively observed acute symptoms of neurological disturbance in the CNS of the kind seen in MS has a duration of at least 24 hours and it is not associated with fever or infection, and it is then followed by a partial or complete recovery (McDonald et al. 2001a). A repeat relapse has to occur at least 30 days after the initial relapse to be considered as a separate event (McDonald et al. 2001a). The first relapse is usually termed as a “clinically isolated syndrome” (CIS). CIS is the first clinical presentation of inflammatory demyelination that could be MS, but it does not fulfill the criteria of dissemination in time (Miller et al. 2005).

RRMS is characterized by clearly defined relapses with full recovery or with sequelae and a residual deficit after the recovery. The periods between disease relapses (remissions) are characterized by a lack of disease progression. Secondary-progressive MS (SPMS) develops when RRMS is followed by a progression with or without occasional relapses, minor remissions and plateaus. In contrast, PPMS is characterized by disease showing progression or disability from onset, without plateaus or remissions or with occasional plateaus and temporary minor improvements.

Benign MS has been defined as RRMS, in which an Expanded Disability Status Scale (EDSS) score is less or equal to 3.0 at least 10 years after the disease onset (Weinshenker 1995b). However, only about 52% of patients continue to remain benign after 20 years of follow-up after MS diagnosis and about 23% have progressed to EDSS score ≥ 6 (Sayao et al. 2007).
2.2.2 Diagnostics of multiple sclerosis

The ability to have an accurate diagnosis as early as possible is important for patient management, counseling and optimal treatment. The diagnosis of MS is currently based on both clinical parameters, such as medical history and neurological examination, and paraclinical measures such as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) examination and evoked potential testing. A definite diagnosis of MS requires evidence of dissemination in time (DIT) and dissemination in space (DIS), i.e. the presence of symptoms affecting more than one discrete CNS region and at more than one time point during the course of the disease.

In 1983, the new diagnostic criteria were proposed by Poser et al. (Poser et al. 1983), and these criteria were expanded to include the use of paraclinical parameters, such that they became the standard MS diagnostic criteria for about 20 years. In 2001, an international panel revised the Poser criteria in order to highlight the significance of MRI information: early McDonald criteria of 2001 (McDonald et al. 2001a), the McDonald criteria of 2005 (Berg et al. 2010, Polman et al. 2005).

Table 1. Poser criteria 1983 (Modified from Milo et al. 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagnostic</th>
<th>Attacks</th>
<th>Clinical lesions and/or Paraclinical lesions</th>
<th>CSF Bands or elevated IgG index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinically definite MS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 and 1</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory-supported definite MS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1 or 1</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 and 1</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinically probable MS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 and 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laboratory-supported probable MS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. McDonald updates from 2001 to 2010 (Modified from Milo et al. 2014).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>2001</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MRI DIS¹</td>
<td>≥3 of:</td>
<td>≥3 of:</td>
<td>≥1 T2 lesions in ≥2 of the following areas:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ≥9 T2 lesions or ≥1 enhancing lesion</td>
<td>• ≥9 T2 lesions or ≥1 enhancing lesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ≥3 periventricular lesions</td>
<td>• ≥3 periventricular lesions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ≥1 juxtacortical lesion</td>
<td>• ≥1 juxtacortical lesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• ≥1 infratentorial lesion</td>
<td>• ≥1 infratentorial lesion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1 cord lesion can replace 1 brain lesion</td>
<td>Any number of cord lesions can be included</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRI DIT²</td>
<td>≥1 enhancing asymptomatic lesion</td>
<td>≥1 enhancing asymptomatic lesion</td>
<td>Asymptomatic enhancing and nonenhancing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>≥3 months after CIS⁴ onset</td>
<td>≥3 months after CIS onset</td>
<td>lesions simultaneously present at any time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>≥1 new T2 lesion on a scan obtained</td>
<td>≥1 new T2 lesion on a scan obtained</td>
<td>≥1 new T2 or enhancing lesion on follow-up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>≥3 months after CIS</td>
<td>≥30 days after CIS</td>
<td>MRI⁵ at any time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSF³ to support?</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes — in RRMS⁶</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ DIS — Dissemination in space, ² DIT — Dissemination in time, ³ CSF — Cerebrospinal fluid, ⁴ CIS — Clinically isolated syndrome, ⁵ MRI — Magnetic resonance imaging, ⁶ RRMS — Relapsing–remitting multiple sclerosis

The recent diagnostic criteria for relapsing-remitting MS

The most recent criteria are those published in 2010, the so-called revised McDonald criteria (Polman et al. 2011).

With the 2010 McDonald criteria, the diagnosis can be established with a single MRI scan in a patient with a clinically silent gadolinium-enhancing lesion and another clinically silent T2 lesion and after only one clinical event suggestive of MS (Polman et al. 2011). Dissemination in time can be also demonstrated should a second clinical attack involve a different site.

Dissemination in time can be demonstrated on MRI: 1. a new T2 and/or gadolinium enhancing lesion(s) on follow-up MRI, with reference to a baseline scan, irrespective of the timing of the baseline MRI. 2. Simultaneous presence of asymptomatic gadolinium-enhancing and non-enhancing lesions at any time.

Dissemination in space can be demonstrated on MRI by ≥1 T2 lesion in at least two out of four areas of the CNS: periventricular, juxtacortical, infratentorial, spinal cord. Gadolinium enhancement of lesions is not required for
dissemination in space. If a subject has a brainstem or spinal cord syndrome, the symptomatic lesions are excluded from the criteria.

A CSF examination is not required for MS diagnosis according to the 2010 criteria. However, many experts have emphasized the importance of CSF studies as potential supporting evidence for the diagnosis of MS as well as in evaluating for other potential etiologies in the case of differential diagnostics.

The recent diagnostic criteria for primary progressive MS

One year of disease progression (retrospectively or prospectively determined) and two or three of the following:

1. Evidence of DIS in the brain based on one or more T2 lesions in the MS-characteristic regions (periventricular, juxtacortical or infratentorial).
2. Evidence of DIS in the spinal cord based on two or more T2 lesions in the cord.
3. Positive CSF (isoelectric focusing evidence of oligoclonal bands and/or elevated IgG index).

2.2.3 Differential diagnosis of multiple sclerosis

The presentation of MS can be monosymptomatic or to have multifocal signs and symptoms, and many neurological disorders of young adults can be similar to MS in their initial presentation. However, other potential explanations for the symptoms need to be ruled out, for example similar presentations can occur in patients who have infectious, neoplastic, congenital, metabolic, systemic disorders, vascular disease or non-MS inflammatory demyelinating disease. Table 3 summarizes the most important disorders for differential diagnostic with MS.
### Table 3. Differential diagnosis of MS.

| Metabolic disorders | Disorders of vitamin B12 metabolism<sup>1</sup>  
|  | Lysosomal leukodystrophies (metachromatic leukodystrophy and Krabbe’s disease)  

| Autoimmune diseases | Sjögren’s syndrome, systemic lupus erythematosus, Behçet’s disease, sarcoidosis,  
|  | chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyradiculopathy associated with central nervous system demyelination, antiphospholipid-antibody syndrome  
|  | antibody mediated encephalopathias: N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor encephalitis, PREM, acute disseminate encephalomyelitis with MOG antibodies, limbic encephalitis  

| Infections | HIV-associated myelopathy<sup>1</sup> and HTLV-1–associated myelopathy<sup>1</sup>, Lyme disease<sup>1</sup>, meningovascular syphilis, Eales’ disease (angiopathia retinæ juvenilis), tropical spastic paraparesis  

| Vascular disorders | Spinal dural arteriovenous fistula<sup>1</sup>  
|  | Cavernous hemangiomas  
|  | Central nervous system vasculitis, including retinocochlear cerebral vasculitis  
|  | Cerebral autosomal dominant arteriopathy with subcortical infarcts and leukoencephalopathy (CADASIL)  

| Genetic syndromes | Hereditary ataxias and hereditary paraplegias<sup>1</sup>  
|  | Leber’s optic atrophy (LHON) and other mitochondrial cytopathies (MELAS)  

| Lesions of the posterior fossa and spinal cord | Arnold–Chiari malformation, nonhereditary ataxias  

| Psychiatric disorders | Conversion reaction, malingering  

| Neoplastic diseases | Spinal cord tumors,<sup>1</sup> central nervous system lymphoma  
|  | Paraneoplastic disorders  

| Other demyelinating diseases | ADEM, NMO/NMO spectrum disorders, idiopathic transverse myelitis  

<sup>1</sup> These disorders are of particular relevance in the differential diagnosis of progressive myelopathy and primary progressive multiple sclerosis (Noseworthy et al. 2000, Miller 2008).

### Neuromyelitis optica and neuromyelitis optica spectrum disorders

One of the most important differential diagnostic diseases for MS is neuromyelitis optica (NMO, Devic’s syndrome) and neuromyelitis optica spectrum diseases (NMOSD). Myelitis and optic neuritis are clinical presentations of both MS and NMO. The presence of longitudinally extensive T2 hyperintense and T1 hypointense spinal cord lesions extending over thee vertebral segments of the
spinal cord that preferentially involve spinal central gray matter is a characteristic of NMO, while MS-typical spinal lesion are shorter extending one to two vertebral segments. By using FLAIR and diffusion-weighted MRI, it has been possible to demonstrate hypothalamic, corpus callosum and brainstem lesions in the periependymal regions surrounding the third ventricle, cerebral aqueduct and fourth ventricle in as many as 60 % of NMO patients (Wingerchuk et al. 2006). Nonspecific small lesions in deep or subcortical white matter are frequent, but only occasionally fulfill the Barkhof criteria for the diagnosis of MS (Barnett et al. 2014).

Most patients with NMO have detectable serum antibodies that target the water channel aquaporin-4 (AQP4–immunoglobulin G, AQP4-Ab); these antibodies are highly specific and beneficial in the clinical diagnosis of NMO (Wingerchuk et al. 2006, Wingerchuk et al. 2015). Almost all AQP4-IgG-seronegative, have been reported to have detectable serum myelin-oligodendrocyte glycoprotein (MOG) antibodies (Kitley et al. 2012). An examination of CSF specimens from NMO and NMOSD patients revealed marked pleocytosis and neutrophilia as well as the absence of oligoclonal IgG bands (Wingerchuk et al. 2006).

2.3 Epidemiology of multiple sclerosis

MS is one of the best studied neurological diseases in terms of epidemiology (Koch-Henriksen & Sorensen 2010). Epidemiological analyses of MS are usually based on retrospectively investigating historical cohorts which include patients receiving health care rather than being based on surveying the general population. In addition, population-based registries provide relevant nationwide information on the epidemiology of MS. For example, the Danish Multiple sclerosis register which was established in 1956, has collected MS cases since 1948 (Koch-Henriksen et al. 2001). The European Database for Multiple Sclerosis (EDMUS) has been available since 1992 (Confavreux 1994). The Norwegian National Multiple Sclerosis Registry was established in 2001 (Myhr et al. 2006).

Recently, some main features have emerged from the epidemiology of MS: first that the disease has a familial recurrence, second that the disease varies greatly in frequency in different countries but that there is a trend to growth (Sawcer et al. 2014). Understanding the geoepidemiology of MS can be a valuable research resource in clarifying the environmental and genetic risk factors.
2.3.1 The geographical distribution of multiple sclerosis

If one examines the worldwide geographical distribution of MS, it is clear that latitude is significantly associated with the prevalence of the disease. The prevalence increases with increasing latitude up to the temperate climate regions. This north-to-south latitudinal gradient is observed in both hemispheres. The extensive studies by Kurtzke conducted in 1970s showed that MS was a geographically-related disease, with a high frequency zone in the northern hemisphere with a prevalence of 30–80 per 100 000 population (or more) extending from about 43° to 65° north latitude and medium frequency zones where the prevalence was in the range 5–25 per 100 000 from about 38° to 46° north latitude. The low frequency zones were defined as those with a prevalence less than 5 per 100 000 from 12°–19° and from 63°–67° north latitude. In Australia and New Zealand, higher southern latitude zones were found out as high-frequency regions. The prevalence rates of MS from Asia and Africa in both hemispheres were low, except for English-speaking native-born whites of South Africa (Kurtzke 1977, Kurtzke 1980).

The strong and statistically significant latitudinal gradient of MS prevalence has been confirmed globally in the recent most comprehensive meta-analysis of MS prevalence which examined 59 countries between 1923 and 2009 (Simpson et al. 2011). The main result of this study was that the gradient increases steadily with increasing latitude, reaching a peak at around 55°, before changing to a significant inverse gradient above 60°; this is true even for northern Scandinavia. Explanations of these phenomena are still lacking although there has been speculation of gene-environmental interactions in the populations of northern Scandinavia. Some possible explanations for the inverse gradient in this region have been previously suggested, i.e. that there are several ethnic groups that make up the genetic structure of northern Scandinavia, including the Swedes, the Finns, the Norwegians and ancestral Sami with a low prevalence of MS (Einarsdottir et al. 2007, Gronlie et al. 2000, Harbo et al. 2007). Another hypothesis was that the very high dietary vitamin D intake may explain the absence of the north-to-south gradient in Northern Norway (Kampman & Brustad 2008).

2.3.2 Sex ratio, prevalence and incidence

The most commonly used measurements in MS epidemiology are sex ratio, the incidence rate, the point of prevalence ratio, the survival and mortality
Sex ratio

MS is more common in women. One possible explanation of this phenomenon is that MS, is similar to the other autoimmune diseases in displaying a female predominance.

In Europe, the female to male ratio is around 2.0 (Pugliatti et al. 2006). The female to male ratio has been shown to have increased from 1.9 to 3.2 for people with MS and birth year from 1930s to the 1970s in a recent Canadian study (Orton et al. 2006). However, no changes in female to male ratios were seen in a Swedish study in MS patients born between 1931 and 1985 (Bostrom et al. 2013). The study revealed that the mean female to male sex ratio in Swedish patients with MS was 2.57. The female to male sex ratio in Finland in regional surveys from central, western and south regions has varied from 1.6 in Seinäjoki to 2.2 in Central Finland to 2.4 in Vaasa and Uusimaa (Sarasoja et al. 2004, Sumelahti et al. 2000).

Prevalence

The total estimated prevalence rate of MS in Europe for the past three decades has been 83 per 100,000, with higher rates in northern countries. The prevalence rates were higher for women in all countries assessed in the epidemiological study of MS in Europe (Pugliatti et al. 2006). In Scandinavia, a few nationwide MS prevalence studies have been published. The following nationwide overall prevalences have been reported: in Iceland, 100/10^5 (1990), in Denmark, 173/10^5 (2005) and in Sweden, 188.9/10^5 (Ahlgren et al. 2011). No nationwide MS surveys have been performed in Norway or Finland. In Norway, the regional population-based surveys have revealed that prevalence varies between 73.0 and 163.6/10^5 with the highest prevalence in the central part of the country (Nord-Trøndelag Country latitude 64° N (Dahl et al. 2004). In the small Northern Norway region of Finnmark (68° N, population 75,975), the prevalence was 51.3/10^5. This region was most densely populated by the Sami people (Gronlie et al. 2000).

In Finland, prevalence has been estimated in the south (Uusimaa) and western (Vaasa) districts since 1960s and recently in 2000–2004 by mean of regional population-based surveys in southern, two western and central regions (Table 4). It is known that Finland belongs to the high-risk areas of MS with a continuously increase in the prevalence rates (Rinne et al. 1966, Vikström 1975, Kinnunen
et al. 1983, Sumelahti et al. 2001, Sarasoj et al. 2004). Improved radiological diagnostics with MRI, which became available in Finland from the early 1990s, may explain both the increase of prevalence and incidence of MS (Sarasoja et al. 2004). There no data available which would account for the increasing prevalence rates in Finland seen during the last two decades. For example, the MS prevalence is unevenly distributed with a cluster in western Seinäjoki region (Sumelahti et al. 2001). The historical to present-day prevalence rates in Finland are demonstrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Prevalence rates (per 10^5) of defined MS in Finland, previously to recent study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region of Finland</th>
<th>Study population size (N)</th>
<th>% of country population</th>
<th>Total defined MS cases (N)</th>
<th>Latitude</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Crude prevalence rate 95CI%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uusimaa</td>
<td>1 227 932</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>1 052</td>
<td>60° N</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>93 87–99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seinäjoki</td>
<td>197 042</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>62° N</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>188 168–211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Finland</td>
<td>263 886</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>62° N</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>105 93–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vaasa</td>
<td>179 079</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>63° N</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>107 91–125</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sarasoja et al. 2004

Incidence

The incidence of MS is low in childhood and increases after the age of 18, reaching its peak between 20 and 40 years with women being affected approximately 2–5 years earlier than men. The incidence declines at ages above 50 years. (Kamm et al. 2014).

Incidence rates seem to fluctuate significantly although there seems to be an increasing trend with time. Some epidemiological studies of patients with MS from different geographical regions of the world have reported an increase in both prevalence and incidence. The estimated European mean annual MS incidence rate is 4.3 cases per 10^5/year. In this European study for the time-period considered, peaks of incidence rates were registered in Seinäjoki, Finland (11.6/10^5/year), south-eastern Scotland (9.3/10^5/year), eastern Norway (8.7/10^5/year) and northern Sardinia, Italy (6.8/10^5/year) (Pugliatti et al. 2006).

In Finnish regions, the total incidence varies from 9.2/10^5/year in central Finland to 5.1/10^5/year in the region of Uusimaa (Sarasoja et al. 2004). The incidence in Seinäjoki (11.6/10^5/year) was more than two times higher than in the neighboring Vaasa region (5.2/10^5/year) in the time-period 1979–1993, suggesting
that there may be the presence of predisposing genes in the Seinäjoki region (Sumelahti et al. 2000).

A profound increase in female incidence of MS in the past three decades has been observed in different populations all around the world i.e. from Iran, South East Wales, Canada, Denmark Crete and Finland (Orton et al. 2006, Hirst et al. 2009, Maghzi et al. 2010, Kotzamani et al. 2012, Koch-Henriksen & Sorensen 2011, Kalincik et al. 2013, Holmberg et al. 2013, Sumelahti et al. 2014). The reasons why the incidence has increased only in women is unclear although changes in the female lifestyle occurring in the past three decades have been proposed as one possible explanation. The study from Crete revealed that female subjects residing in urban centers or having relocated at a young age from the countryside to towns were disproportionally affected. This phenomenon might be associated with the changes that accompanied urbanization: cigarette smoking, use of pasteurized cow milk and contraception (Kotzamani et al. 2012). In Denmark, the incidence rates have been monitored since 1950 through the population-based nationwide Danish MS Registry. The incidence of onset in men has remained constant from 1950 to 2000 apart from the normal year-to-year stochastic variation, whereas the female incidence of onset has almost doubled since 1970 (Koch-Henriksen & Sorensen 2011).

2.3.3 Survival in multiple sclerosis

Survival analyses are considered time-to-event data. In MS studies, the focus of attention is on the length of time between two events such as time at onset and death or time at diagnosis and death. Long-term survival in MS had been studied mainly in 1960s-1990s, when it represented essentially the natural course of MS, since disease-modifying therapies for RRMS were only developed and released onto the market after 1993. The 25-year survival rates from clinical onset (first symptoms) to all deaths in verified MS cases (by Poser diagnostic criteria) were 78 % in Finland (during the period 1964–1993 (Sumelahti et al. 2002) and 62 % in Denmark (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 1994) (all verified MS cases by Allison and Millar diagnostic criteria from 1954) (Allison & Millar 1954). In Norway, 20 years’ survival probability was 75 % on MS clinically defined by the McAlpine diagnostic criteria from 1961 (McAlpine 1961). There are methodological differences among these studies, and MS disease was verified by different diagnostic criteria. Some studies have claimed that they have detected improved survival (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 1994) but others have evaluated stable or
worsening long-term survival. Young age at clinical onset (first symptoms), initial remitting clinical course, and the presence of sensory symptoms at onset have all been significantly associated with longer survival. (Midgard et al. 1995).

The 21 years’ survival rates from clinical onset in RRMS-patients receiving early IFNβ-1b treatment were 80 %, which was significantly better than obtained with placebo as well as better than results in previous studies (Goodin et al. 2012).

The results of several studies on mean survival after onset in the past three decades have varied from 28 years in men and 33 years in women in Denmark (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 1994) to 45 years in patients with MS in Finland (Sumelahti et al. 2002). The median survival time from onset was about 10 years shorter for MS patients than for the age-matched general population. In the Finnish cohort, the 25-year survival rate after diagnosis for all causes of death was 62 % and when followed from clinical onset to all causes of death, the survival rate was 78 % (Sumelahti 2002). In the Danish cohort, if one uses the 25 years after onset criterion, then the survival probability was 57 % for men (80 % for the general male population) and 67 % for women (88 % for the general female population) (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 2004b).

2.4 Risk factors of multiple sclerosis

Epidemiological data indicate that both environmental and genetic factors play a key role in the development of MS. As stated above, latitude has a strong influence on MS prevalence. Other major environmental risk factors for MS are infections (Epstein–Barr virus, EBV), low vitamin D levels and lifestyle risk factors.

2.4.1 Genetic factors

The lifetime risk of MS increases if there is a familial history of the disease and about 20 % of MS patients report that they have a relative with the same disease. However, families with more than three affected relatives in more than one generation are extremely rare. The lifetime risk for MS is 0.2 % in the general European population, 2–4 % in siblings of MS patients (sibling recurrence risk 10–20) and 30 % in monozygotic twins of MS patients (Kuusisto et al. 2008, Sarkijarvi et al. 2006, Willer et al. 2003). Today, although over 100 different genetic variants associated with MS have been identified, the risk impact of these
variants is extremely low (Sawcer et al. 2014). These risk variants consistently implicate genes associated with immunological processes, overwhelmingly lie in regulatory rather than coding regions and are frequently associated with other autoimmune diseases. The genetic risk variants have been divided into two major types of genes: Human Leukocyte Antigen (HLA) and non-HLA genes.

The HLA region plays a role in nearly all immune-related disorders, including MS (Jersild et al. 1972, Olerup & Hillert 1991). The strongest association in MS has been observed with the HLA-DRB1*1501 allele. Each copy of this allele increases the risk of MS by approximately 3-fold. The HLA-DRB1*1501 allele frequency is between 3 and 20 % in the European population, with the population frequency increasing with the population risk of MS from southern to northern Europe (Dean et al. 2008). The increased risk for MS in association with HLA-DRB1*03:01, HLA-DRB1*13:03, and HLA-DPB1*03:0138 alleles has also been confirmed. In contrast, HLA-A*02:01 has been found to be protective. Together, the HLA alleles explain at most 20 % of the sibling recurrence risk for MS (Sawcer et al. 2014).

Genome-wide association studies have confidently identified over 100 different genetic variants outside of the HLA region (non-HLA genes) associated with susceptibility to MS. The majority of these variants have been found to be associated with different immunological genes and genes in immunological pathways. Each of these risk alleles increases the risk of MS rather marginally, from only 1.08 to 1.22-fold, but they may have a more important role in gene-environment interactions (International Multiple Sclerosis Genetics Consortium 2011).

2.4.2 Hygiene hypothesis and EBV infection

The hygiene hypothesis proposes that low exposure to childhood infections because of a clean environment predisposes individuals to pro-inflammatory immune responses to antigens and this is the phenomenon which increases the MS risk. Infection mononucleosis is due to the Epstein–Barr virus (EBV) and it is considered a marker of poor childhood hygiene, where children are infected asymptptomatically with EBV in the first years of life. In contrast, infection mononucleosis is common in Western countries, where individuals usually escape infection in early childhood and acquire EBV during adolescence or young adulthood. Individuals with a history of infection mononucleosis manifesting in
adolescents and young adults have a 2.3-fold higher relative risk of MS than those without EBV infection (Ascherio 2013, Thacker et al. 2006).

2.4.3 Vitamin D

Vitamin D insufficiency has been shown to be associated with increased susceptibility to MS. Case–control studies suggest that vitamin D is the most likely candidate to explain the inverse relationship between ultraviolet (UV) radiation and MS susceptibility (Munger et al. 2004).

There are two forms of vitamin D: vitamin D3 (cholecalciferol) and vitamin D2 (ergocalciferol), which are both available in dietary form but only vitamin D3 is synthesized in the skin by UVB radiation in the sunlight. Vitamin D and its metabolites are transported in the plasma, bound to the vitamin D binding protein. Vitamin D is transformed in the liver into 25-hydroxyvitamin D (25(OH) D). Under stimulation by parathyroid hormone, this metabolite is transformed in the renal proximal tubule to form 1,25-dihydroxyvitamin D (1,25(OH)2D), which is the active metabolite and binds to vitamin D receptors in its target tissues. Vitamin D receptors are not only present in bone, kidneys (i.e. classical target tissues) but also in gonads, breast, pancreas, cardiovascular system, brain (microglia) and circulating immunity cells, i.e. macrophages, monocytes and activated lymphocyte T and B cells. This connection between vitamin D and the basic immunity cells is of particular interest given the potential immunological role of this vitamin in autoimmunity in general and especially in multiple sclerosis (Pierrot-Deseilligny & Souberbielle 2010).

Vitamin D deficiency has been linked to bone diseases such as rickets and osteoporosis and furthermore to some autoimmune diseases including type 1 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis and system lupus erythematosus. Moreover D vitamin deficiency is believed to play a role in some cancers, in particular colon and breast cancer as well as in diseases of the cardiovascular system and infection.

There is some controversy about the optimal serum levels of vitamin D and no absolute consensus exists about the recommended minimum level of 25(OH)D, i.e. some authors recommend a minimum level of 50 nmol/l (Lips 2001), whereas others state that the serum level should be at least 80 or 100 nmol/l (Bischoff-Ferrari 2007, Holick 2004, Kimball et al. 2014, Niino et al. 2008).
Sunshine remains the main natural source of vitamin D, providing 80–90% of the requirement in the absence of vitamin-rich food sources. Exposing a part of the body (for example, the face, trunk and arms) to the sun in summer can provide 10 000 IU of vitamin D in less than half an hour. But this supply disappears within a few weeks and cannot readily be guaranteed throughout the year, except in tropical countries. At latitudes beyond the 55–60th parallel, periods without a solar source of vitamin D may be significant, as long as 6–8 months per year (Diffey 2010, Holick 2004). An epidemiological study from United Kingdom detected a significant correlation between MS prevalence and end-of-summer UV index (Handel et al. 2010).

Recent epidemiological studies in temperate countries (mainly beyond the 40th parallels) on the adult population (15–18 years, involving both genders and mostly Caucasian people) have shown that serum levels of 25(OH)D are low, irrespective of what assays are being used (Pierrot-Deseilligny & Souberbielle 2010).

The higher circulating levels of vitamin D have been associated with a lower risk of multiple sclerosis. The protective effect on multiple sclerosis risk was particularly clear for 25(OH)D levels measured before the age of 20 years (Munger et al. 2006). According to this evidence, adequate vitamin D nutrition contributes to the prevention of MS. Moreover the tradition of consuming a high-fat fish diet in a location with low solar UVR might explain why no latitudinal gradient is observed in Northern Norway (Kampman & Brustad 2008).

In Sweden, in a large cohort of women (n = 164 000) who were prospectively examined, the serum 25(OH) D levels. 25(OH) D levels ≥ 75 nmol/l were associated with a 60% decrease in MS risk compared with levels < 75 nmol/l (Salzer et al. 2012). Correction to an optimal level (100–150 nmol/l) is achievable with supplementation of 1000–4000 IU/day, but there no experimental evidence to support such a strategy (Ascherio 2013). The beneficial effect of UVB itself in experimental autoimmune encephalomyelitis (EAE) could refer to an independent protective role of UVB in EAE as well as in MS (Becklund et al. 2010). However this finding will need additional confirmation.

Vitamin’s D supply in Finnish population

The population of Finland is strongly affected by a deficit in solar radiation due to the country’s northern geographical location and the short duration and low intensity of sunlight in the winter (UV-index = 3–4). A deficit in dietary vitamin
D was also identified in the Finnish population in the National FINDIET 2007 Survey, which showed the average intakes of vitamin D continued to remain below the recommendations. This tendency existed all over Finland, especially in both males and females in the age group 25–35 years (Pietinen et al. 2010). This age at which the vitamin D supply is especially low is closely associated with the age of MS onset.

### 2.4.4 Life style risk factors

**Smoking**

Several retrospective and prospective studies have investigated the association between smoking and MS susceptibility. These studies have detected a significant increase in the MS risk among current smokers OR 1.6–1.9 American women from the Nurses’ Health study and the Nurses’ Health study II revealed a 70 % higher risk of MS in consistently heavy smokers (> 25 pack/years) compared with never-smokers (Hernan et al. 2001). In contrast, the evidence, pointing to an association between parental smoking at home and early onset MS in their children, is more controversial. In fact, there is one publication which found no evidence for any possible causal linkage between cigarette smoke and MS onset or clinical course. (Jafari & Hintzen 2011). Changes to smoking behavior may have an impact on MS incidence and MS prevention.

No association has been detected between alcohol or caffeine intakes and the risk of MS (Massa et al. 2013).

**Childhood obesity**

Findings from a population-based case-control study in Sweden and a prospective cohort study in Denmark showed that childhood obesity can be an independent risk factor for the increase in MS incidence (Hedstrom et al. 2012, Munger et al. 2013). The strongest association of risk for MS has been found in obese patients carrying HLA-DRB1*15, indicative of a genetic and lifestyle interaction (Hedstrom et al. 2014). The authors claimed that measures taken against adolescent obesity could well represent a preventive strategy against MS.
2.5 Comorbidity in multiple sclerosis

2.5.1 General aspects

Comorbidity exerts adverse effects on health outcomes, including functional abilities, and mortality. The phenomenon of comorbidity is common in the general population and increases with age. It is also the case that comorbidity occurs in patients with MS at the time of MS diagnosis. It has been found that comorbidity is associated with longer delays in the time between symptom onset and MS diagnosis. Furthermore, comorbidity is associated with increased disability at the time of diagnosis (Marrie et al. 2009c).

2.5.2 Physical comorbidity

In the North American Research Committee on Multiple Sclerosis (NARCOMS) Registry, the presence of physical comorbidities was common in MS patients (Marrie et al. 2008). This population-based mail-survey included all physical comorbidities. According to the responses from the self-reported diagnosis questionnaires, 77.1 % (n = 6907) of participants with MS had at least one physical comorbidity, of whom 30.4 % had one comorbidity, 25.6 % had two and 44.1 % three or more comorbidities. The most common individual physical comorbidities were hypercholesterolemia (37 %), hypertension (30 %), arthritis (16 %), irritable bowel syndrome (13 %), and lung disease (13 %).

The age-standardised prevalence of hypertension, dyslipidemia, asthma, psoriasis, eczema and anaemia was significantly higher in MS patients compared to the corresponding values in the general Australian population. Rheumatoid arthritis and anaemia were associated with a greater relapse risk (Tettey et al. 2016). Vascular comorbidity (heart disease, arterial hypertension, hypercholesterolemia and peripheral vascular disease) and diabetes have been associated with a disability progression in patients with MS (Marrie et al. 2010). The nationwide Danish study revealed that patients with MS had about a 30 % higher risk of death from cardiovascular disease than the age-matched general population (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 2004a).
2.5.3 Mental comorbidity

According to the NARCOMS study which involved a self-report registry for patients with MS, nearly half of the participants reported a mental comorbidity (most commonly, depression and/or anxiety). Depression was also underdiagnosed and undertreated. Lower socioeconomic status was associated with increased odds of suffering depression (Marrie et al. 2009b).

2.5.4 Neurological comorbidity

There is very little data with respect to the prevalence of neurological comorbid diseases in MS. Most previous studies of neurological comorbidity of MS have focused on a narrow spectrum of comorbidities, such as migraine and epilepsy. The majority of the studies have revealed an increased frequency of epilepsy in patients with MS in comparison to the general population (Catenoix et al. 2011, Ikeda et al. 2010, Kang et al. 2010, Knox 2010, Koch et al. 2009, Zaccara 2009). In a study originating from Norway, epilepsy was four times more common in MS patients than in the general population (Lund et al. 2014). Epilepsy in RRMS patients seems to be the consequence of a particularly severe and rapidly evolving cortical pathology (Calabrese et al. 2012).

Several studies have shown that MS patients have an elevated risk for primary headaches such as migraine and tension-type headache, although other studies have not revealed any differences in primary headache prevalence between MS patients and general population (Ikeda et al. 2010, Kister et al. 2011, La Mantia 2009, Putzki & Katsarava 2010). The prevalence of stroke, movement disorders and peripheral nervous system disorders in MS patients has not been previously systematically evaluated.

2.6 Osteoporosis and fractures in multiple sclerosis

2.6.1 General aspects

Osteoporosis is a metabolic skeletal disorder characterized by low bone mineral density (BMD). The diagnosis of osteoporosis has typically been verified from the World Health Organization (WHO) diagnostic criteria of a T-score of −2.5 or lower as assessed at the lumbar spine, femoral neck, total hip or one-third radius sites with dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry (DXA) (Baim & Leslie 2012).
However, fragility fractures are sufficient to allow a clinical diagnosis of osteoporosis. Osteoporosis is an independent predictor of fragility (low trauma) fractures (Hernlund et al. 2013). Hip fractures as well as vertebral fractures are considered as typical osteoporosis-related fragility fractures. Furthermore, fragility fractures occur commonly in the arm, pelvis, ribs and distal forearm. A history of fragility fractures is predictive of further fractures and associated with significant morbidity, mortality, and health care costs all around the world (Kanis et al. 2004). The rates of low-trauma fractures increase with older age and decreasing bone density, although individuals without osteoporosis as assessed by DXA could sustain low-trauma fractures (Baim & Leslie 2012).

2.6.2 Osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis

One recent meta-analysis indicated that MS patients have reduced BMD in lumbar spine, femur neck and hip compared with healthy controls. Disease duration > 7 years, total cumulative steroid dose > 15 g and EDSS score > 3 were all risk factors for reduced BMD in MS patients (Huang et al. 2014). However, a study from Norway found evidence for low BMD in patients with newly diagnosed MS and CIS, with minor disability (median EDSS score 1.0) (Moen et al. 2011). Several studies pointed out that the prevalence of osteoporosis in subjects with MS is higher than in the general population (Marrie et al. 2009a, Hearn & Silber 2010). The prevalence of osteoporosis in MS patients in NARCOMS database has been reported to be 15.4 % (Marrie et al. 2009a).

Several studies have discussed the possibility that there may be common mediators in the pathogenesis of MS and osteoporosis. Both CD4+ and CD8+ T cells play roles in the pathogenesis of inflammation associated with MS. Cytokines derived from these cells, especially interleukin (IL)-1, tumor necrosis factor-&-, IL6, IL11 are known to mediate the pathogenesis of osteoporosis. These cytokines have been shown to promote osteoclastogenesis, causing bone resorption (Manolagas & Jilka 1995). This finding may partly explain the results of the study of Moen et al. (2011), which revealed that a high proportion of MS patients have osteoporosis or osteopenia already when they are diagnosed with the disease, even in patients with CIS.
2.6.3 Osteoporosis and vitamin D deficit

Vitamin D plays a primary physiological role in maintaining extracellular calcium ion levels in the human body. Vitamin D influences calcium levels primarily by controlling the absorption of calcium from the intestine, through direct effects on bone and also through its effects on parathyroid hormone (PTH) secretion (Mithal et al. 2009). Furthermore, vitamin D deficiency, resulting in decreased bone mineralization, secondary hyperparathyroidism, and increased cortical bone loss, have been linked to the pathogenesis of osteoporosis and hip fractures (Lips 2001).

2.6.4 Osteoporosis and glucocorticoid use

The long-term use of glucocorticoids leads to glucocorticoid induced osteoporosis (GIO). GIO is the most common form of secondary osteoporosis (Mazziotti et al. 2006). There is convincing evidence to indicate that a dose of 5 mg per day or more of prednisolone equivalent for 3 months or longer increases the risk for fracture (van Staa et al. 2002). The risk of fracture was found to increase rapidly after the start of oral corticosteroid therapy (within 3 to 6 months) and to decrease after termination of therapy. The risk remained independent of underlying disease, age and gender (van Staa et al. 2002). With respect to the pathophysiology of GIO, glucocorticoids are known to exert both direct and indirect effects on bones. The primary effects on bone cells are mediated via the osteoblasts and osteocytes. These effects lead to the suppression of bone formation, a central feature in the pathogenesis of GIO. Glucocorticoids also inhibit calcium absorption from the gastrointestinal tract, by antagonizing the effects of vitamin D and by decreasing the expression of specific calcium channels in duodenum. Renal calcium resorption is also inhibited by glucocorticoids which explains why secondary hyperparathyroidism can be present in the context of glucocorticoid use (Canalis et al. 2007).

2.7 Risk of fractures in patients with multiple sclerosis

The phenomenon that MS patients suffer more bone fractures than the normal population was recognized in the early 1990s (Stenager & Jensen 1991). In that study, it was noted that the incidence of fractures increased with increasing age, disease duration and disability. In corticosteroid-treated MS patients, relatively
high or low cumulative doses of steroids did not correlate predictably with the occurrence of fractures (Troiano et al. 1992). New data have indicated that patients with MS may be at an increased risk of fracture due to the greater risk of falling and decreased bone mineral density when compared with the general population (Bazelier et al. 2011, Bazelier et al. 2012). Osteoporosis results in bone mineral loss and reduced bone mass leads to increased fracture rates as revealed by Cosman et al. (1998). In that study, fractures in the absence of major trauma had occurred in 2% of controls but many more, 22%, of MS patients (Cosman et al. 1998) Bone loss verified by DXA in the spine was greater in women with MS than in controls (1.6 to 3.5% per year loss in MS patients versus no change in controls). Furthermore, bone loss in the spine occurred faster in MS patients with low (< 20 ng/mL) 25-hydroxyvitamin D levels.

In a recent study from Kansas University, American patients with MS had a more than two times higher risk for suffering fractures than controls in large retrospective analysis lasting over 20 years (Bhattacharya et al. 2014). This risk was independent of age, gender, race with patients sustaining these fractures at a younger age than controls. The limitation of this study was a lack of information concerning the severity and duration of MS and it was not ascertained whether the rate of falls in the MS cohort was different from the non-MS cohort. Several complex factors, may be involved in accounting for the reduced bone mass in MS patients including e.g. low vitamin D levels and use of certain medications such as glucocorticoids and anticonvulsants. Physical inactivity and reduced mechanical load of the bones may also play a role as well as the inflammatory processes of the disease (Gupta et al. 2014).
3 Aims of the research

Very few epidemiological studies into MS have been conducted in areas close to the Arctic Circle. The general aim of this work was to study the epidemiology of MS in the Northern Finland population, with a focus on prevalence- and incidence trends, survival, neurological comorbidity and fracture risk. The specific aims of the study were:

1. To evaluate the incidence and prevalence of MS in Northern Ostrobothnia.
2. To investigate neurological comorbidities in MS and to recognize the associations of neurological comorbid diseases with gender, clinical course, disability level and duration of MS.
3. To study how comorbid neurological diseases may influence on the survival rates of patients with MS.
4. To define the prevalence of low-energy fractures in patients with MS.
5. To assess the differences in the EDSS level and duration of MS at the time of a fracture event.
4 Subjects and methods

4.1 Location of the study population

Northern Ostrobothnia is situated in Northern Finland, near to the Arctic Circle, at 65°1′N latitude and 25°25′E longitude. The population of the region on 31st December 2007 (Study I) was 386 972, accounting for about 7.3% of the total population of Finland, and the female/male ratio was 0.99. The population of the region on the 31st of December, 2010 (Study II–III) was 398 335, which was equivalent to 7.4% of the total population of Finland, and the female/male ratio was the same as in Study I. The region is served by Oulu University Hospital (OUH) and a large number of general practitioners. The diagnosis and treatment of MS and other neurological diseases are concentrated in OUH; thus OUH gathers broad information about the comorbidity of other neurological diseases and fractures. The population data were obtained from Statistics Finland (http://www.tilastokeskus.fi).

4.2 Ethics

The study protocols of all the studies were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Northern Ostrobothnia hospital district and followed the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki.

4.3 Subjects

The three study cohorts have been collected in the Northern Ostrobothnia district: study cohort 1 (prevalence cohort, prevalence day 31st December 2007), study cohort 2 (incidence cohort, which covers the time period 1992–2007) were collected for Study 1. Study cohort 3 (comorbidities cohort, which covers the time period 2000–2010) was used in Study II and Study III. Study cohort 1: all living patients with clinically definite MS registered with neurologists at OUH or with the local authority health centers in Northern Ostrobothnia on 31st December 2007 were included into the prevalence cohort.

Study cohort 2: All new clinically definite MS cases identified in the 16 years from 1st January 1992 until 31st December 2007 were included into the incidence
cohort. Patients with MS already diagnosed in other departments of neurology were excluded from the incidence cohort.

This time interval (1992–2007) was chosen because all definite clinical diagnoses of MS would have been based on the same criteria. The diagnosis of MS in each case was made by a specialist neurologist and verified not only clinically but also with laboratory tests and brain MRI according to the Poser criteria (Poser et al. 1983) and early McDonald criteria of 2001 (McDonald et al. 2001b). The new revised McDonald criteria of 2005 were taken into use in the Department of Neurology only on January 1st 2008 (Polman et al. 2005). All subjects were identified from the hospital records by reference to code 3400A in ICD 9 (1st January 1992–31st December 1995) and code G35 in ICD 10 (1st January 1996–31st December 2007).

Study cohort 3: all new, clinically definite MS cases, n = 491 were identified and included to the study cohort 3 (comorbidities cohort) during the 21-year time interval from 1st January 1990 through 31st December 2010 among the population of Northern Ostrobothnia. The diagnoses of MS were made by a neurologist who verified the diagnoses according to the Poser criteria (Poser et al. 1983), early McDonald criteria of 2001 (McDonald et al. 2001a) or the McDonald criteria of 2005 (Berg et al. 2010, Polman et al. 2005) and details were gathered about sex, age at onset, age at MS-diagnosis, age at death, clinical course type (i.e. RRMS, PPMS and benign) (Poser et al. 1983, Weinshenker 1995a). The classification of MS as benign was based on EDSS scores of 0–3 over a duration 10 years from the verified MS diagnosis (Poser et al. 1983, Weinshenker 1995a). The severity of the MS (EDSS score) was evaluated in the year of MS diagnosis, at the time 10 years from diagnosis and/or at the time of the last evaluation. In this cohort, 93.3 % of patients suffered from RRMS, and 6.7 % of cases were diagnosed as PPMS. The cases defined as benign in this study represented 17.9 % of all the RRMS cases. The mean age at onset was lower in patients with RRMS compared to patients with PPMS (p < 0.005), and the mean age at onset of MS was lower in females than in the males with RRMS (p = 0.05).

4.4 Neurological comorbidity

Data concerning neurological comorbidity (Study II) were identified by a systematic review of hospital records according to the following criteria: doctor diagnosed migraine (both without and with aura), clinically verified epilepsy, anamnesis and/or typical clinical status of movement disorders (e.g., Parkinson’s
disease, essential tremor and restless legs syndrome), ischemic stroke with diagnostic findings based on brain imaging, peripheral nervous system involvement verified by ENMG, cranial neuralgias with typical anamnesis, and MRI-verified brain tumors. The types of epileptic seizures terms were assigned according to the International League Against Epilepsy (ILAE) Revised Classification of Seizures 2010 (Berg et al. 2010).

4.5 Assessment of fractures

All fracture types (Study III) were identified from the patients’ hospital records. Patients who had sustained fractures before the age of 15 years or a cranial fracture at any age were excluded from the study. All fracture events were classified as high- or low-energy (fragility) fractures (Flinkkila et al. 2011, Morrison et al. 2013). A high-energy injury was defined as that occurring from a sports activity, a fall from a height of more than 1 m, a bicycle accident, a motor vehicle collision, or a major intrinsic event (e.g., a stroke, syncope, or epileptic seizure). Fractures that were not associated with these high-energy events were defined as low-energy fractures. A low-trauma fall was defined as a fall from standing height such as slipping, tripping, or stumbling on a flat surface or stairs. Non-fall fractures were also identified.

A diagnosis of osteoporosis was confirmed from the hospital records and was based on the results of DXA or an X-ray based assessment showing an osteoporotic bone structure. A subset of patients received a BMD examination for osteoporosis as part of their clinical treatment and investigations. A clinical osteoporotic fracture has been defined as a fracture of the radius, ulna, humerus, rib, femur, hip, pelvis, or vertebrae. Clinical osteoporotic fractures were limited only to those occurring in these anatomical locations for the purposes of comparison. None of the present cohort had suffered rib or pelvic fractures. Fragility fractures of fingers, toes and ankle were excluded from calculations of clinical osteoporotic fractures. The fracture type as well as the association between the duration of MS and EDSS score with a fracture event were determined.

4.6 Statistical methods

Parametric t-tests were used to analyses baseline differences between the study groups. In all studies P value of less than 0.05 was considered to be statistically
significant. The derivation of P values was made by application of proper statistical tests. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS for Windows, (IBM Corp. Released 2010–2011. IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows, versions 19.0 and 20.0. Armonk, NY: IBM Corp.).

**Statistical methods in Study I Prevalence and incidence of MS**

Crude prevalence and incidence were estimated by the direct method, incidence being calculated for one-year time intervals in 1992–2007, both overall and by gender. Rates were given with 95% confidence intervals. Prevalence was defined as (Armitage & Berry 1995)

\[
P = \frac{\text{total number of cases at given time}}{\text{total population at that time}} \times 100,000
\]  

(1)

Incidence was defined as (Armitage & Berry 1995)

\[
I = \frac{\text{number of new cases in period of time}}{\text{population at risk}} \times 100,000
\]  

(2)

**Statistical methods in Study II Neurological comorbidities**

Associations between neurological comorbidities and MS have been evaluated in study cohort 3 (time interval 2000–2010) according to the duration, gender, disability level and course were systematically analysed for each neurological comorbid nosology and for overall neurological comorbidity by nonparametric tests (Chi-squared or Fisher’s exact test). The associations were compared with duration of MS disease subdivided into four groups: less than 5 years, from 5 to 10 years, from 10 to 15 years and more than 15 years from MS diagnosis. In order to analyse the association with disability, patients were divided into two groups. In group one, the EDSS levels were equal to or less than 3, in group two, EDSS levels were greater than 3 at the time of the last evaluation. The survival rate was analysed using Kaplan-Meier curves and the log-rank test. The time points of evaluation were 21 years from both the first symptom and time of MS diagnosis. The use of Kaplan-Meier curves is beneficial because of the time factor, especially when that factor has a major impact on mortality rate. All analyses were performed using a univariate rather than a multivariate approach due to the relatively small subgroup sample sizes. Log rank tests significance was assessed when p < 0.05.
Statistical methods in Study III Fractures

The baseline characteristics of MS patients with osteoporosis and fractures were compared using the Chi-square test in study cohort 3 (time interval 2000–2010). A scatter-plot was used to analyse the association of disability and age at the time of a fracture event with the distribution of fractures according to nature of the fracture (low- vs. high-energy). When assessing the association of steroid administration with the likelihood of a fracture, three subgroups were defined based on the administration profile of short courses of steroids during the follow-up: group 1, patients who did not receive steroids; group 2, patients who received fewer than five or five short courses of methylprednisolone; and group 3, patients who received more than five short courses of methylprednisolone. Kaplan-Meier analysis was used to estimate the proportion of MS patients who sustained fractures during the early stage of MS and was performed because of differences in the follow-up duration after MS diagnosis.
5 Results

5.1 Prevalence and incidence of multiple sclerosis in Northern Finland

The province of Northern Ostrobothnia prevalence cohort (Table 5) contained a total of 397 (F/M = 69.5% / 30.5%). Patients incidence cohort (Table 6) comprised a total of 374 patients (F/M = 68.4% / 31.6%) with a clinically definite diagnosis of MS. The female/male ratio was 2.2. Diagnostic MRI and CSF findings have being reported in Table 7.

Table 5. Characteristics of the prevalence cohort (all MS cases 31.12.2007¹). Study I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Age at diagnosis (years)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>276</td>
<td>69.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>30.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>397</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ the prevalence date chosen


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>PRMS</th>
<th>PPMS</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Age at onset</th>
<th>Age at diagnosis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>n</td>
<td>mean</td>
<td>range</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>30.9 11–58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>33.5 15–59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>348</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>31.7 11–50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 7. MRI scan and CSF analysis in study I. Incidence cohort 1992–2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Brain MRI</th>
<th>Cervical MRI</th>
<th>TH MRI</th>
<th>CSF 2-OC</th>
<th>CSF IgG index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 256) available</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>36.7</td>
<td>95.3</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS related</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>79.1 4</td>
<td>76.6 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 118) available</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>56.7</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>86.4</td>
<td>93.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS related</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>72.0 4</td>
<td>67.8 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n = 374) available</td>
<td>99.7</td>
<td>53.7</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>92.5</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS related</td>
<td>91.4</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>76.9 4</td>
<td>74.2 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 magnetic resonance image, 2 cerebrospinal fluid, 3 oligoclonal fractions, 4 MS related means positive, 5 MS related means elevated

The overall prevalence of MS in the province of Northern Ostrobothnia was 103/10^5 (95 % CI, 93–113). The prevalence of MS in women was 144/10^5 (95 % CI, 128–162) and 62/10^5 (95 % CI, 52–74) in men.

The mean overall incidence was 6.3/10^5 (95 % CI, 5.2–7.2), person-years 5844638 (1992–2007). The incidence of MS in women was 8.6/10^5 (95 % CI, 7–10.2), person-years 2937274.00 and 3.9/10^5 (95 % CI, 3.1–4.7) in men, person-years 2953414.00. The incidence of MS increased during the 16-year period. This elevated incidence was clearly attributable to the pronounced increase among females, since no corresponding increase occurred in males. The mean age at the onset of MS was significantly lower in the females (31 years) than in the males (33.5 years) p < 0.023 (t-test), as also was the age when the clinically definite diagnosis was made (35.1 vs. 37.6 years), p < 0.036 (t-test).

5.2 Neurological comorbidities

5.2.1 Neurological comorbidities in general

One or more neurological comorbid disease was present in 17.1 % of MS patients (n = 84/491). The majority of patients were experiencing one (94 %, n = 79) neurological comorbid disease at the time of evaluation. However, 6 % cases suffered from two (n = 5) neurological comorbid diseases.
Table 8. The frequencies of comorbid diseases and their correlation between gender, clinical course, disability impact and duration of MS.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Gender¹</th>
<th>Course²</th>
<th>Disability³</th>
<th>Duration¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migraine</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>0.151</td>
<td>0.101</td>
<td>0.669</td>
<td>0.663</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilepsy</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>0.102</td>
<td>0.675</td>
<td>0.266</td>
<td>0.181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stroke</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.672</td>
<td>0.391</td>
<td>0.611</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement²</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.023*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PNSD³</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.645</td>
<td>0.027*</td>
<td>1.000</td>
<td>0.066</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>0.903</td>
<td>0.387</td>
<td>0.402</td>
<td>0.121</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ p-value, ² movement disorders, ³ peripheral nervous system disease, * p-value < 0.05

5.2.2 Migraine

Migraine was the most common neurological disease in patients with MS. Doctor-diagnosed migraine was observed in 10.4 % of MS patients (78.4 % female). Migraine was more prevalent in women with benign MS compared to those patients with other types of the disease.

5.2.3 Epilepsy

The frequency of epilepsy was 4.7 %, and it was the second most common comorbid disease encountered in these MS patients. The mean age at the first epileptic seizure was 36.6 years (range 16–62). Epilepsy was diagnosed before MS onset in 20 % of cases. An epileptic seizure was the first symptom of MS disease in one case. EEGs were available from 83 % of the patients with epilepsy. The EEGs were normal in 26.3 % and related to epilepsy in 73.7 % of cases. The most common type of seizure was a focal seizure that evolved into a bilateral tonic-clonic seizure (47.8 %). Generalised tonic-clonic, generalised myoclonic and focal seizures were also diagnosed. Status epilepticus was diagnosed in only one case.

Antiepileptic treatment had been started in 91 % (n = 21) of the patients with epilepsy. Epilepsy was diagnosed, and antiepileptic treatment had been started after the first seizure in 25 % of the patients. At the last evaluation, 61 % of all MS patients with epilepsy were seizure-free, and one patient suffered less than one seizure per year. Three cases (14.3 %) were experiencing more than one seizure per year. One patient had seizures at a rate of more than one per month.
5.2.4 Stroke

The frequency of ischemic stroke was 1.2% ($n = 6$, five females) in the cohort. The mean age at stroke occurrence was 43.1 years (range 30–57). The mean age at MS onset in the stroke patients was 39.7 years (range 17–58). Two patients suffered a stroke before MS onset (one 10 years before, in the other the stroke occurred 24 years before MS onset). One patient had both an MRI-verified stroke and the first MS symptoms in the same year. The etiologies of the ischemic strokes remained unknown. However, heart diseases and the risks for cardiac embolism were present in two patients in the follow-up. In the present study, a longer MS disease duration correlated with a higher stroke possibility. Two cases died after the stroke; one of these cases died two years after the stroke, the other died 31 years after the stroke.

5.2.5 Peripheral nervous system disorders

Five MS patients were identified with peripheral nervous system disorders. Two of these cases had PPMS, and three suffered from RRMS. Four patients had polyneuropathy, and one had a bilateral L-5 radiculopathy due to spinal stenosis. ENMG were performed in all of these cases. Peripheral nervous system disease was diagnosed after MS onset in all cases. The mean time between MS onset and peripheral nervous disease onset was 7.8 years (range 2–14). There was a significant correlation between the incidence of peripheral nervous system disease and PPMS. Both of the PPMS patients were males, and one suffered from distal sensorimotor polyneuropathy, while the other had a bilateral ulnar demyelinating neuropathy.

5.2.6 Movement disorders

Four patients with movement disorders were identified in the cohort. Idiopathic Parkinson’s disease was diagnosed in one patient eight years after PPMS onset. One patient suffered from essential tremor, and two patients had restless legs syndrome. The prevalence of restless legs syndrome in this cohort was 0.4%.

5.2.7 Other neurological disorders

Malignant brain tumors were not detected in the cohort.
5.3 Survival in multiple sclerosis

Table 9. Characteristics of the MS cohort 3 (all new cases 1990–2010). Studies II–III.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Female (%)</th>
<th>Male (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>340 (69.2)</td>
<td>151 (30.8)</td>
<td>491 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at onset mean / range</td>
<td>31.0 / 11–65</td>
<td>33.9 / 15–65</td>
<td>32.0 / 11–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis mean / range</td>
<td>35.3 / 12–67</td>
<td>38.2 / 16–70</td>
<td>36.2 / 12–70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead N (%)</td>
<td>7 (2.1)</td>
<td>10 (6.6)</td>
<td>17 (3.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at death mean / range</td>
<td>45.0 / 25–70</td>
<td>57.1 / 45–74</td>
<td>52.1 / 25–74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRMS4 N (%)</td>
<td>254 (74.7)</td>
<td>122 (80.8)</td>
<td>376 (76.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at onset mean / range</td>
<td>30.8 / 11–65</td>
<td>32.9 / 15–59</td>
<td>31.5 / 11–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis mean / range</td>
<td>35.0 / 12–67</td>
<td>37.3 / 17–67</td>
<td>35.8 / 12–67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead N (%)</td>
<td>4 (1.6)</td>
<td>7 (5.7)</td>
<td>11 (2.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at death mean / range</td>
<td>34.0 / 25–49</td>
<td>54.6 / 45–68</td>
<td>47.1 / 25–68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PPMS5 N (%)</td>
<td>19 (5.6)</td>
<td>14 (9.3)</td>
<td>33 (6.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at onset mean / range</td>
<td>40.8 / 21–58</td>
<td>47.9 / 22–65</td>
<td>43.9 / 21–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis mean / range</td>
<td>44.6 / 21–59</td>
<td>53.2 / 34–70</td>
<td>48.3 / 21–70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead N (%)</td>
<td>3 (15.8)</td>
<td>3 (21.4)</td>
<td>6 (18.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at death mean / range</td>
<td>59.7 / 54–70</td>
<td>63.0 / 57–74</td>
<td>61.3 / 54–74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benign6 N (%)</td>
<td>67 (19.7)</td>
<td>15 (9.9)</td>
<td>82 (16.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at onset mean / range</td>
<td>29.5 / 18–49</td>
<td>28.1 / 16–49</td>
<td>29.2 / 16–49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age at diagnosis mean / range</td>
<td>33.9 / 20–65</td>
<td>31.4 / 16–50</td>
<td>33.5 / 16–65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dead</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 p < 0.005 (Total, RRMS vs. PPMS), 2 p = 0.05 (Male vs. Female), 3 p = 0.005 (Male vs. Female), 4 relapsing-remitting MS, 5 primary progressive MS, 6 `benign` cases

Over a 21 year period, a total of 17 (3.5 %) deaths occurred in the study cohort 3 (n = 491). The mean age at death was 52.1 (range 25–74 years). The age at death for females was lower (mean 34.0 years) than that for males (mean 54.6 years) with RRMS (p = 0.005) (Table 9). All cases, which identified as benign MS were still alive at the point of evaluation. The mean time of the delay from onset to diagnosis in total cohort was 4.2 years.

The 21-year survival rate was 90.5 % from the time of MS diagnosis. The 21-year survival rate from the time of MS onset was 95 %, however, this rate declined to 73 % after 40 years from the onset of MS. The 21-year survival rate was significantly lower in MS patients with stroke compared to those patients not suffering a stroke. No other differences in survival were observed between MS patients with or without neurological comorbidities (Figure 1).
Fig. 1. 21-Year survival rates (a) from time of MS onset and from time of MS-diagnosis in the Finnish Northern Ostrobothnia MS-cohort, (b) with stroke as neurological comorbid disease and (c) with neurological comorbid disease. (Krokki et al. 2014, published by permission of Elsevier).

5.4 Fractures and osteoporosis

The fracture types as well as the association between the duration of MS and the EDSS score with a fracture event were determined in study III. The majority of fractures were low-energy fractures and the majority of fractures had occurred within early stage of MS disease in non-disabled to moderately disabled patients (EDSS score 0–4).
In all, 39 MS patients (8.0 %) were identified with at least one fracture event and there were a total of 52 (10.6 %) fracture events in the cohort. The majority of patients (n = 28) with fractures experienced a single fracture event. However, nine patients sustained two fracture events, and two patients suffered three fracture events. The first fracture event occurred within one year after MS diagnosis in 53.8 % (n = 21) of the 39 MS patients having experienced at least one fracture event, with fourteen of those fractures occurring before the MS disease had been diagnosed. The percentage of patients experiencing a first fracture event cumulatively increased to 69.2 % (n = 27) within five years after the verified diagnosis of MS. According to a Kaplan-Meier analysis of the entire MS cohort, the probabilities of sustaining fractures within five, 10, and 20 years after MS diagnosis were 5.7 %, 6.9 % and 14.2 %, respectively.

The most frequent fracture sites were a single vertebra (19.2 %), distal forearm (19.2 %), ankle (25 %), and proximal femur (9.6 %). Thirty-five fracture events (67.3 %) satisfied the criteria of a low-energy fracture, and the overall frequency of low-energy fractures was 7.1 %. The majority of fragility fractures occurred in MS patients who were not disabled or mildly/moderately disabled (EDSS score 0–4) There was no correlation between the location of the fracture and MS severity. When using the same criteria for osteoporotic fractures as previous registry studies, the prevalence of osteoporotic fractures was estimated to be 5.9 % (29/491). Of these fractures, 3.6 % (n = 18) were characterized as low-energy fractures. All of the femur fractures, 60 % of the vertebral fractures, 77 % of the ankle fractures, and 60 % of the distal forearm fractures were classified as low-energy fractures.

Taking into account all of the fracture events, the mean age of patients when fractures occurred was 41 years (range, 17–62 years). The mean patient ages at which high-energy and low-energy fracture events occurred were 37.1 years (95 % CI, 31.3–43.0 years) and 42.5 years (95 % CI, 38.3–46.6 years), respectively. There was no significant difference between the age of patients who sustained fragility fractures and the age of patients who sustained high-energy fractures. Furthermore, when patients were grouped according to their gender or the course of their MS disease course, there were no significant intergroup differences in patient age at the time of their fracture. Similarly when patients were categorized according to the numbers of short courses of methylprednisolone administration, there were no significant intergroup differences in the risk of fragility fractures.
Patients who sustained low-energy fractures were not routinely investigated for osteoporosis. A DXA scan was only performed in 26% of fragility fracture cases, but 89% of these patients were suffering from osteoporosis. An osteoporotic bone structure was specified in the X-ray findings of one case.

Table 10. Characteristics of fractures.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of fracture</th>
<th>Total fracture patients</th>
<th>Total fracture events</th>
<th>High-energy fracture events</th>
<th>Low-energy fracture events</th>
<th>Fracture events from the cohort % (n = 491)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femur</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humerus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vertebrae</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distal forearm</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ankle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shin bone</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finger, toe</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Cranial fractures and fracture age under 15 years are excluded.
6 Discussion

6.1 Prevalence and incidence of multiple sclerosis in Northern Finland

6.1.1 Prevalence

This study is the first epidemiological survey conducted near to the Arctic Circle 65°1´ N latitude in Northern Finland. The overall prevalence of MS in Northern Ostrobothnia was determined to be 103/10^5. The prevalence of MS was over twofold higher in women than in men in the study region. There is no nationwide MS prevalence survey for the whole of Finland, but the prevalence rates have been previously investigated in four regions of Finland: in the southern Uusimaa region, in western regions of Vaasa and Seinäjoki and also in central Finland. The uneven distribution of MS in those regions had been revealed in those previous studies (Kinnunen et al. 1983, Rinne et al. 1966, Sarasoja et al. 2004, Sumelahti et al. 2000, Sumelahti et al. 2001, Tienari et al. 2004). The clear and latitudinal gradient of MS prevalence have been confirmed globally in the recent most comprehensive meta-analysis of MS prevalence in 59 countries in a long time period, from 1923 until 2009 (Simpson et al. 2011). The prevalence of MS has been shown to increase with latitude, reaching a peak around 55°, before changing to a significant inverse gradient above 60°. When comparing the present results with previous Finnish epidemiological studies, there is no evidence for the north-to-south latitudinal gradient. In Finland, the highest prevalence of MS has been found in the middle of the Finland in the Seinäjoki region (188/10^5) which has a latitude of 62° N (Sumelahti et al. 2001). However, the prevalence of MS seems to be similar in other parts of Finland independently from the latitudinal gradient inside Finland. The same tendency has been found in a recent study from Norway (Berg-Hansen et al. 2014). The prevalence of MS in the southern and northern regions of Norway was similar, but a higher MS prevalence was observed in middle Norway. The overall prevalence in the northern region of Tromsø (latitude 69°38’ N) was 191/10^5 and 249/10^5 in middle Norway (Trondheim latitude 63° N). In Sweden, the prevalence of MS in 2008 was also higher than in Finland being 188.9 per 100 000 and in that country the risk of MS has been found to increase with increasing northern latitude in both men and women (Ahlgren et al. 2011).
6.1.2 Incidence

The mean overall incidence of MS in Northern Ostrobothnia was $6.3 \times 10^5$ in this study during the time period 1992–2007. A similar total incidence of MS $6.7 \times 10^5$ has been found also in Pirkanmaa during the time period 1981–2010 (Holmberg et al. 2013) and total incidence $5.2 \times 10^5$ in Central Finland region in 1979–1998 (Sarasoja et al. 2004). The last-calculated incidence of MS is highest in western Finland, especially in Seinäjoki ($14.7 \times 10^5$) and Vaasa ($11.7 \times 10^5$) (Holmberg et al. 2013). The present study estimated an annual fluctuation of MS incidence, however it seemed that there was an evident increase occurring in the incidence from $6.2$ to $11.8 \times 10^5$ during the study period 1992–2007. The peak incidence, 14.1, occurred in 2000 in Northern Finland.

This increase in the MS incidence is due to the increasing incidence among women. Similar findings with the increasing incidence of MS in women throughout a 30-years’ follow up have been reported in recent Finnish studies from the University Hospital District of Tampere (including Pirkanmaa, Seinäjoki and Vaasa regions) (Holmberg et al. 2013, Sumelahti et al. 2014).

A recent study from UK claimed that there was a downward trend in the incidence in both women and men in the two most recent decades, i.e. 1990–2010 (Mackenzie et al. 2014) However, an increase in the MS incidence in women has been found in the majority of other epidemiological studies (Alonso & Hernan 2008). In Denmark, the incidence rates for women increased from $4.61 \times 10^5$ to $11.85 \times 10^5$ during the period 1973–2002, whereas only a small increase was observed in men (Koch-Henriksen & Sorensen 2010). The reasons of these differences are still unclear. This phenomenon cannot be explained by genetics and can only partly be explained by better diagnostic certainty due to more sensitive diagnostic criteria and more intensive evaluation. These changes in the female incidence occurring over such a short period of time point to environmental risk factors, such as urbanization of lifestyle (e.g. a relative increase in the numbers of women smokers, oral contraception and use of pasteurized cow milk (Kotzamani et al. 2012). Obesity at ages 18–20 (BMI $\geq 30$ kg/m²) has been found to double the risk of MS in women (Munger et al. 2009). The important role of a deficit of vitamin D and low life-long levels of UV radiation as well as the role of sex hormones and cytokines have been postulated as the reasons for the gender differences in MS in a few studies (Eikelenboom et al. 2009, Kragt et al. 2009). The age when a woman has her first child has not been found to influence the risk of MS (Magyari et al. 2013).
Lifestyle risk factors, as well as high-latitude geographical location, combined with decreased exposure to solar radiation and vitamin D deficiency may play a role in the disproportionate increase encountered in the MS incidence in females living in Northern Ostrobothnia.

6.2 Neurological comorbidities and their impact on survival

The median survival from birth in the MS population was 75.9 years vs 83.4 years in the matched population (Marrie et al. 2015).

Comorbid diseases may exert effects on MS patients’ prognosis and survival. The majority of studies into this topic have concentrated on psychiatric and immunological diseases or cancer in MS patients (Marrie et al. 2015). Neurological comorbid diseases have been mainly restricted to epilepsy and migraine (Catenoix et al. 2011, Kang et al. 2010, Koch et al. 2009, Zaccara 2009). However, systematical population based studies are rare and in particular, there is virtually nothing known about the association between these other diseases and the survival times of MS patients. The contribution of comorbidities to survival in MS received little attention before the appearance of the present study (Marrie et al. 2015). Here, neurological comorbid diseases were examined in MS patients with hospital based settings; the aim was also to evaluate the association between comorbidity status and mortality.

It was found that neurological comorbidity was rather common in MS patients; however, most patients suffered from only one neurological condition in addition to MS. Migraine and epilepsy were the most common comorbid neurological diseases in these MS patients. Several studies have shown an increase in the risk of migraine in patients with MS (Doi et al. 2009, Kang et al. 2010); however, these findings are controversial (Putzki and Katsarava, 2010). In previous studies, epilepsy has been the most widely studied neurological disease among MS patients and in all reports it has been found to be more prevalent in MS patients when they are compared to non-MS populations (Poser & Brinar 2003, Forsgren et al. 2005, Zaccara 2009, Catenoix et al. 2011). Here, other neurological comorbid diseases were also identified; there were a few MS patients with peripheral nervous system disorders, restless legs syndrome and one case with idiopathic Parkinson’s disease. However, because the lack of population based controls, it is not possible to evaluate the amount of those diseases compared to the non-MS population.
There are rather few reports investigating the prevalence of stroke, cardiovascular diseases, hypertension, diabetes mellitus type II or hyperlipidemia in patients with MS (Roshanisefat et al. 2014). Here, the prevalence of stroke in MS patients was similar to the age-matched Finnish population (Meretoja et al. 2010). In previous studies, patients with MS have been reported to have a higher risk of suffering ischaemic stroke than those without MS (Allen et al. 2008, Christiansen et al. 2010). A slightly increased relative risk for cardiovascular diseases (risk ratio (RR) 1.31) in MS patients has been found in Sweden (Roshanisefat et al. 2014). These investigators also reported an increased risk for ischemic stroke in RRMS in comparison with the general population (RR 2.57). The strokes were detected closely after MS onset and the researchers speculated that the increased frequency of ischaemic stroke in MS was most probably due to surveillance bias resulting from diagnostic investigations being conducted for MS. However, in the present study, the duration of MS disease, but not the age of the MS patient, significantly increased the risk of stroke occurrence which is at odds with the Swedish study. It was also found that stroke was clearly associated with increased mortality in the patients with MS. All-cause mortality has been found to be 2–2.9-fold higher in the MS patients compared to other populations (Sumelahti et al. 2010, Capkun et al. 2015, Goodin et al. 2015). The causes of mortality of MS patients are variable, but major causes of death have been due to infections, pulmonary and cardiovascular diseases or suicide (Capkun et al. 2015, Goodin et al. 2012, Goodin et al. 2014). An increased mortality from cardiovascular diseases, but not from ischaemic stroke, in MS patients has also been reported (Bronnum-Hansen et al. 2004).

One interesting result emerging from our study is that the 21-year survival rate from diagnosis to death by any cause (90.5 %) was higher than in other previous reports, i.e. in the study of Goodin et al. (2012) examining 21-year survival rate in interferon-β treated MS patients. In the previous Finnish study conducted by Sumelahti et al. (2002) the 25-year survival rate was 62 % from the time of diagnosis to death by any cause. However, in that work (Sumelahti et al. 2002) the MS cohort covered the period 1964–1993, before the introduction of immunomodulatory treatments in Finland and therefore, it reflects the survival rate of the natural course of MS. Instead in the present study, most of the patients had received immunomodulatory treatments, which may have influenced their survival. Furthermore, in the present study, the cohort size was somewhat small.
6.3 Low-energy fractures, osteoporosis and multiple sclerosis

In the present cohort, 8% of MS patients have experienced at least one fracture event and the prevalence of all fractures events was about 10% (Table 10). Using the same criteria for osteoporotic fractures as applied in previous registry studies, the prevalence of osteoporotic fractures was estimated at about 6%. This is less than in MS registry based (NARCOMS) data in which more than 25% of MS patients had low bone mass and 15% of cases had a history of fracture after age of 13 years (Marrie et al. 2009a). However, similar findings than found here have been reported in three other studies in which the prevalence of all fractures in patients with MS has varied between 2% and 10% (Bazelier et al. 2011, Bazelier et al. 2012a, Bazelier et al. 2012b). A recent meta-analysis described a significant association between MS and fracture risk (RR = 1.58) (Dong et al. 2015). There is no epidemiological data of fractures, fragility fractures or osteoporosis in the general Finnish population. Thus it is not possible to make any comparison between the frequency of fractures in the MS cases and the general population. However, some features were identified which give rise to the speculation that especially fragility fractures may be associated with MS itself.

The symptoms of MS which include muscle weakness, poorer postural balance, stiffness, numbness, tingling, impaired vision, fatigue, dizziness, disability, or spasticity with reduced physical activity and all of these symptoms could be responsible for a fall in an MS patient. However, it was found that the accidents occurred in over half of the MS patients within one year after MS diagnosis and in patients with no or mildly/moderately disability and only occasionally in the advanced phase of the disease. In addition, chronic inflammatory processes, vitamin D deficiency, and glucocorticoid use may increase the risk of osteoporosis and fractures in patients with MS (Hearn & Silber 2010). Low BMD values have been detected even in newly diagnosed MS patients with no or minor physical disability (Moen et al. 2011). Low vitamin D levels have been reported in the Finnish population, and low levels of D vitamin are a risk factor for fragility fractures (Heliovaara et al. 2009, Huotari & Herzig 2008). Unfortunately, in the present study, D vitamin levels were not measured. Interestingly, low-energy (fragility) fractures appeared also in the femur and vertebral in addition with typical and easily injured ankle and distal forearm. In previous studies, MS patients have also been reported to suffer tibia, femur and hip fractures (Bazelier et al. 2011, Bazelier et al. 2012). Vertebral fractures have also been associated with MS (RR 1.44) (Dong et al. 2015). No correlation was
detected between the extent of glucocorticoid use, gender or age with the likelihood of suffering fragility fractures. These results differ from the previous meta-analysis, where female gender (RR 1.80) or glucocorticoid usage (RR 1.33) were associated with an increased fracture risk in MS patients (Dong et al. 2015).

Although MS patients are known to be at risk for osteoporosis, only 26% of our MS patients with low-energy fractures had been investigated for this disease. There are only a few reports which have described the systematic evaluation for osteoporosis or osteopenia in MS patients (Moen et al. 2011). In the NARCOMS study, only about every other MS patient reported having undergone bone density testing (Marrie et al. 2009a). It is worthwhile remembering that both osteoporosis and fragility fractures can be prevented. These results emphasize that more attention should be paid to the bone health on MS patients in clinical practice.

6.4 Strengths and limitations of the study

This cohort is highly representative of MS during the period 1990–2010 in the area of Northern Ostrobothnia, since almost all the patients with MS were referred to OUH for diagnostics and treatment. In addition, all of the patients remained in follow-up in OUH irrespective of the location where they underwent rehabilitation or received other types of medical treatment. This ensures the most accurate epidemiological as well as neurological comorbidity data. MRI scans were available for diagnosis from the beginning of 1990’s and also the diagnostic criteria remained unchanged during the study period. However, some cases with very mild symptoms without referral to diagnostic evaluation or cases with minimal imaging findings may have been missed. In the majority of previous reports, neurological or other comorbidities have been documented by register based methods. In the present study, the clinical patient records were evaluated by the same neurology specialist and thus provided accurate data about all neurological diseases that can be diagnosed and treated in the neurology ward (for example, epilepsy and stroke). The main limitations of the comorbidity studies are the lack of population based controls and that there was no systematic query about migraine or other headaches and restless leg syndrome in the patients. For this reason, the prevalence of migraine may be somewhat underestimated, because migraine is very common and under diagnosed in general population with some migraine patients only suffering from mild headache. RLS may have been under-diagnosed in the present cohort. In addition, the somewhat limited size of the sample influenced the selection of statistical methods.
6.5 Conclusions and future aspects

This is the first report of the epidemiology of MS in the northern part of Finland. The prevalence and incidence are similar than the Finnish average. The postulated south-to-north latitudinal increase in prevalence was not found, which is consistent with the MS epidemiology in Norway. An increasing incidence of MS among women was detected which is a phenomenon also detected in other recent studies. The causes for this increase remain unknown but they may be associated with environmental and/or lifestyle factors.

Neurological comorbidity as well as fragility fracture events was common in this MS cohort. Stroke was associated with increased mortality in the MS patients. Interestingly, fragility fractures were common in this cohort and those fractures occurred already in early stage of the diseases when there was still no major disability. A worrying finding was that the existence of osteoporosis had not been taken into consideration as only a very small number of patients had had their bone density investigated.

Further investigations with population or register based cohorts including all Finnish MS patients are needed to evaluate the role not only of neurological comorbidities but also other comorbid diseases in the prognosis and survival of MS patients. In addition, more investigations should be focused on bone health of MS patients. The comorbid diseases and especially the risk for osteoporosis and fractures in these patients should also be better taken into account in clinical practice.
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