

# Can Black People Get MS?



## **“I thought Black people couldn’t get MS.”**

This statement slips from the lips of well-meaning people with a frequency that used to make my skin flash hot, a condition which never served me well since heat — as it is for many of us living with multiple sclerosis — is my predominant nemesis. MS is often **MSunderstood**, but I’ve come to understand that queries about my MS diagnosis aren’t offered with malintent. I mean, most folks dare not kick a downed dog, right? Rather, this type of uninformed comment is rooted in miseducation.

Lack of awareness has been a sneaky culprit in the underdiagnosis and undertreatment of MS for many melanin-rich individuals. It was a long-held belief within the medical community that MS was more of a “white woman’s disease.” Recent [studies](#) have debunked this myth. A 2022 study of patients newly diagnosed with MS revealed the disease risk was **47% higher** in African Americans than any other participant group.

Multiracial studies of MS are critical for those working within the medical field. In January 2014, I told my physician that my fingertips had begun to tingle feverishly. I also complained of stiffness and sporadic pain in my right leg. His perfunctory physical examination noted no visible concerns. He attributed my symptoms to fibromyalgia or maybe rheumatoid arthritis — diseases which often defy diagnosis. I accepted his preliminary prognosis without question.

Three months later, the fingertips on my left hand had gone completely numb. My leg hurt all the time and I fell frequently. After a dangerous fall at work, I was rushed to the hospital where a savvy ER doctor ordered an MRI. Bright white spots littered my brain and spine —

undeniably MS.

I don't think my primary physician ever considered MS. And neither of us knew that the incidence of MS among Black Americans, like me, is consistent with the incidence of MS in white Americans.

While MS has proven itself to be an equal opportunity disease, Black people may encounter it in its most aggressive form. In a research [study of 375 African Americans with MS](#), findings indicated that participants demonstrated rapid disease progression. On average, Black patients were full-time wheelchair users eight years earlier than their white counterparts and transitioned to secondary progressive MS in shorter time spans.

Life with MS can be disproportionately difficult for many African Americans. Having a more aggressive disease course, decreased response to medications, limited access to care and lower socioeconomic status are contributing factors. But in my opinion, lack of knowledge and understanding of MS within the African American population ranks top-of-list. Education and outreach are key components in the long fight against MS, as exemplified by the establishment of the [National African Americans with MS Registry \(NAAMSR\)](#).

Launched in 2020, the NAAMSR is comprised of neurologists from regions across the United States who specialize in treating MS. This proactive platform aims to identify treatment constraints, expand access to MS care, and bolster opportunities for African Americans to participate in clinical trials. This particular initiative is essential to the development of drug therapies that could more effectively treat African Americans with MS.

The NAAMSR is committed to raising awareness about MS. This organization interfaces with colleges/universities and utilizes social media to increase MS awareness. Further, it liaises with likeminded entities, such as the National MS Society, to advance care and quality of life for African Americans living with MS. These efforts are not only invaluable to the Black community, such educational advancement is vital to our treasured healthcare providers. After all, clinicians can't diagnose conditions they aren't looking for. And they certainly won't be able to diagnose illnesses they don't **know** to look for.

MS isn't that one-size-fits-all swimwear found in department stores. This disease isn't color blind. Those of us who live or may end up living with MS come from ethnicities as varied as our individual skin tones. The word is out, thankfully. Whenever I see a TV commercial advertising my MS med of choice, I smile. And I shimmy a little when the person in the ad has skin that matches mine.

And, so in answer to the oft-repeated question, "Can black people get MS"?

I'll quote Obama's 2008 presidential campaign slogan — **Yes, we can.**