



Alecia Harris stays strong for her children Randall, 8, left, Robert, 11, and Ryan, 10. Harris began having multiple sclerosis symptoms in 2001.

Madelyn Ruggiero / Special to The Detroit News

# Diagnosis: MS

African Americans are more likely to have an aggressive form of the disease, but researchers are closer to providing help

## About the event

**What:** 2008 Mind, Body and Spirit Health Conference, which will feature health screenings, speakers and information about multiple sclerosis, particularly for African Americans with the disease.

**When:** 8:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m., Saturday

**Where:** Fairlane Club, 5000 Fairlane Woods Drive, Dearborn

**Tickets:** \$35 (\$15 for those 21 and younger, and \$20 for those 55 and older)

**Information:** Call Alecia Harris at (313) 999-5259

By **KIMBERLY HAYES TAYLOR**  
*The Detroit News*

**F**or Alecia Harris, the symptoms of multiple sclerosis came suddenly. One day in early 2001, she was nearly blind in one eye. The next day, her legs were so numb she could barely walk.

And they rage on. Just the other day, while walking up two steps at work, she fell with no warning. She didn't lose her balance; she didn't stumble. She just fell for no apparent reason. As mysteriously as her symptoms come, they go. But that's MS, she says.

Harris sought answers and support. Initially, she attended a group for people newly diagnosed with MS. When that didn't fully satisfy her, in 2002 she founded her own organization, Walking With Faith Inc., a nonprofit that helps create more awareness about MS. On Saturday, she'll host the 2008 Mind, Body and Spirit Health Conference, which will feature health screenings, speakers and information about multiple sclerosis, particularly for African Americans with the condition.



**HEALTH ONLINE**  
Go to [detroitnews.com/health](http://detroitnews.com/health) fitnessblog  
For more health news, read Kimberly Hayes Taylor's health blog.

[detroitnews.com](http://detroitnews.com)

Belleville resident says about her disease, "God didn't give us the spirit of fear, but you *wonder* about the unknown. I definitely want to take care of my kids. I want to take care of my elderly parents, be a good daughter and a good mom. But you just never know."

Harris, an African American, is correct. She doesn't know how quickly her disease will progress — no one does. It's a common concern among African Americans living with MS, and research shows they have a valid reason to be concerned.

While African Americans are half as likely to be diagnosed with the neurological disease, their MS is more likely to progress aggressively than in their white

## About MS

**What is it?** Multiple sclerosis is a chronic, often disabling disease that attacks the central nervous system, which is made up of the brain, spinal cord and optic nerves. Symptoms may be mild, such as numbness in the limbs, or severe, such as paralysis or loss of vision. The progress, severity and specific symptoms of MS are unpredictable and vary from one person to another.

**Causes:** Scientists believe a combination of several factors may be involved, though the cause is still unknown. Research areas include immunology (the science of the body's immune system), epidemiology (patterns of disease in the population) and genetics.

**Symptoms:** Fatigue; numbness of the face, body or arms and legs; problems with walking, balancing and coordination; bladder dysfunction; bowel dysfunction; vision problems; dizziness and vertigo; sexual dysfunction; pain; cognitive dysfunction; emotional changes; depression; and spasticity. Over the course of the disease, some symptoms will come and go, while others may be more lasting.

Source: National Multiple Sclerosis Society

"It's so unpredictable," the 42-year-old

*Please see MS, Page 2E*

# MS

*Continued from Page 1E*

counterparts. For example, one study released last summer shows that African Americans had MS for an average of nine years before needing a cane, walker or wheelchair, compared with an average of 17 years for whites. The study in *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology, also indicated that African Americans with MS have a 29 percent higher level of antibodies in their spinal fluid than affected whites.

Dr. John R. Rinker II, who led the study while at the Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, says despite the data, the study reflects new hope for African Americans with MS and for all people living with the disease because it opens the door for more queries.

"It will lead people to ask more specific questions about why MS behaves differently among certain groups of people," says Rinker, now assistant professor of neurology at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "If you can look at a group and understand why the disease causes more problems, you may gain insights into the disease in general. What I'm really talking about is averages. There are African Americans who aren't more disabled than Caucasians. If you understand there's a gene that is more common in African Americans that seems to explain that, then a therapy could be developed that could benefit all MS patients."

## Research shows promise

Dr. Omar Khan agrees there is a new optimism on the horizon for African Americans with MS,



**Khan**

Richard Pryor had a long, hard battle with MS before he died in December 2005 at age 65. Talk-show host and author Montel Williams also has been diagnosed with the disease and in 2000 founded the Montel Williams MS Foundation to fund scientific study.

Khan, professor of neurology and director of the Multiple Sclerosis Center at Wayne State University and the Detroit Medical Center, says this year, in particular, will prove significant in the world of MS research.

In September, Khan, who runs the nation's MS clinic with the largest African-American population, will be among more than 5,000 of the world's researchers who will gather in Montreal for a conference on MS. While there, he says he will release details on his findings that MS may progress more aggressively among African Americans because of B cells, a type of immune cell that creates antibodies in humans.

"There are so many fascinating aspects of this that we are beginning to learn," Khan says. "We also are looking at genes that may be involved in this process. We have

to identify why we are seeing what we are seeing. We hope this information will be ready this year."

He says the center also has invited Michelle Obama, wife of Sen. Barack Obama, as keynote speaker for an event Sept. 11 at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. She will discuss growing up with a father who had MS.

Khan adds he's grateful to all the African Americans with MS who have been brave enough to participate in studies at the center. They have helped move researchers closer to answers, he says.

Every week, about 200 people are diagnosed with MS, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention does not require American physicians to report new cases, and because the symptoms can be invisible, the numbers are only an approximation, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

## Get help early

Rose Taylor, vice president of programs and services for the National MS Society, Michigan Chapter in Southfield, says the sooner people get diagnosed, the better. And when they do, she says, "We should be out there running to get on a disease-modifying drug."

She says it's also challenging to get African Americans to participate in programs at the society, which offers free medical transportation, help in building wheelchair ramps on homes and assisting paying utility bills.

"The disease is so devastating and unpredictable," she says. "When you're a young person and you happen to get hit with this in

the prime of your life and your disease is going to progress faster than it will with other groups, know there is help. There are people at Wayne State, the University of Michigan and Henry Ford. If folks will get in the door get diagnosed and get treatment early, they can actually be all right. The sooner you can get treated the better."

That's what Alicia Peacock shares with people who ask her advice about living with MS. She's a "veteran," who was diagnosed with MS in 1983.

"You can wake up in the morning and feel great. By noon, you feel like a Mack truck rolled over you," says Peacock, 53, of Southfield. "You never know, it just happens. So if there is something wrong with you, go and get it checked out. Don't ignore it. I put it on the back burner. Get second opinion because some times it's difficult to get diagnosed. Imagine what would have happened if I believed the first doctor who told me I had a brain tumor. Do as much reading as you can do."

Alecia Harris, whose husband — a minister — filed for divorce two years after she was diagnosed because "I wasn't as nice as I to be," also says having a strong spiritual life helps.

"It's because of my faith and my belief that I know everything will be fine," she says. "Sometimes it sounds pie-in-the-sky, but it had not been for my relations with Christ, I would not have survived this."

*You can reach Kimberly Hay Taylor at (313) 222-2058 or ktaylor@dtnetnews.com.*