**NORTH SOUTH DIVIDE**

**Living up north speeds up MS onset by two years – with darker winters to blame**

**BY SARA KAMOUNI**

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Research has revealed how far north you live could have an impact on your health

**WE know there’s a north-south divide when it comes to culture and economics – but a new study suggests how far north you live could also have an impact on your health.**

Research led by scientists from the University of Tasmania has revealed the further north you live, the earlier symptoms of [multiple sclerosis (MS)](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1260073/radical-treatment-can-halt-and-even-reverse-progress-of-multiple-sclerosis/) develop – with every 10 degrees in latitude linked with a 10-month earlier onset.

Previous studies have linked latitude with the prevalence of the neurodegenerative disease, but this was the first to examine the age at which symptoms start – looking at data from over 22,000 patients in 21 countries.

While the disease’s exact cause remains unknown, it is thought a number of genetic and environmental factors have an effect – including latitude, exposure to sunlight and vitamin D levels.

Shockingly, those who had the least sunlight exposure [in the winter months](https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/50078/7-simple-tips-for-keeping-your-hair-healthy-this-winter/) developed symptoms nearly two years earlier than those who had the most.

Professor Bruce Taylor, the study’s lead author, said: “The explanations of this geographical variation have largely been considered to reflect changes in ambient ultraviolet radiation and or … variations in vitamin D sufficiency although this is by no means the only potential explanation.

“In the present study, we sought to evaluate whether there was any evidence of a latitudinal variation in the age of [symptom onset of MS](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/1852139/temporary-tattoos-that-release-medicine-into-the-body-could-soon-treat-chronic-medical-conditions-such-as-ms/) and if so, whether such variation could be ascribed to a similar UV-based mechanism or if other factors were at play.

“We found evidence that those living at higher latitude had a significantly younger age at onset, with every 10° increase in latitude associated with around a 10-month earlier age at onset.

**What is multiple sclerosis?**

– MS is a neurological condition  
– It can affect the brain and/or spinal cord  
– It is caused when the immune system doesn’t work properly  
– Symptoms vary, but can include muscle stiffness and spasms, difficulty walking and vision problems  
– It can also cause balance problems and difficulty thinking  
– There is no cure for MS

‘Accordingly, we found a positive association between a lower winter ambient UV level and an earlier age at onset, these results are neatly in harmony due to the known relationship between UV levels and latitude.’

[More than 100,000 people in the UK have MS](https://www.thesun.co.uk/news/2001858/mum-with-multiple-sclerosis-who-struggles-to-walk-has-87-a-week-benefits-axed-because-she-can-squeeze-assessors-thumb/) – and it is most commonly diagnosed in patients in their 20s and 30s.