



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Epilepsy: A Common Disorder

National Epilepsy Awareness Month — November 2008

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[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC — safer, healthier people.

[Dr. Gaynes] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

Epilepsy is one of the most common brain disorders known to man. About two and one half million people in the United States suffer from the condition. Although there is no cure, the disorder can usually be successfully treated.

Dr. Patricia Price is a researcher with CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. She's joining us today to discuss epilepsy. Welcome to the show, Tricia.

[Dr. Price] Thank you, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tricia, let's start out with what is epilepsy?

[Dr. Price] Well, epilepsy is a chronic neurological condition and is characterized by recurring seizures. A seizure is something that happens when abnormal electrical activity in the brain causes involuntary changes in body movement or function, sensation, awareness, or behavior.

[Dr. Gaynes] Is epilepsy more common in any particular age group?

[Dr. Price] Actually, anyone at any age can develop epilepsy. It's most commonly found in the very young and in older adults, and that's largely because of some additional health risks in these life stages.

[Dr. Gaynes] So what causes a person to actually have an epileptic seizure?

[Dr. Price] Well, the first thing to remember is you can't catch epilepsy; it's not something that's contagious. There are a lot of causes. It could develop after a head injury, perhaps caused by a blow to the head or a fall, or from an infection that reaches the brain, like meningitis, or in early life, from a birth injury. Strokes or brain tumors can cause them. And some types are connected to genetic disorders. Many times though, the cause, unfortunately, remains a mystery.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tricia, once a person is diagnosed with epilepsy do they have this condition for the rest of their life, or will it go away?

[Dr. Price] Well, with early recognition and proper treatment, most people's epilepsy will go into remission, meaning the seizures will stop and they may be able, at some point, to discontinue

medication, if they're taking it for control. For about 25-30 percent, however, seizures may continue and other types of treatment may be tried.

[Dr. Gaynes] So, what types of treatment are available for epilepsy?

[Dr. Price] The goal to treatment is ending seizures without causing unwanted side effects from the treatment. The first line of treatment is usually medication, given under the supervision of a physician. And often, one medication will be started and then sometimes a second will be added. Other therapies include vagus nerve stimulation. This is small, battery-operated device that's implanted in the chest, and it sends bursts of energy to a large nerve in the neck, called the vagus nerve, which leads into the brain. The device is programmed to send just the right amount of energy to decrease or stop seizures. There's also a diet called the Ketogenic Diet. It's a strict, high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet. It was originally prescribed only for children but it's been found also to help some adults. And finally, surgery is also an option when seizures can't be controlled by other treatment. This will be considered after careful evaluation and testing done by epilepsy specialists.

[Dr. Gaynes] Where can listeners get more information about epilepsy?

[Dr. Price] There are a number of good sites; I'm going to mention just two of them. Information about the CDC epilepsy program can be found at www.cdc.gov/epilepsy. In addition, an excellent site for all types of information about epilepsy, links to support groups and local services, and even help in finding an epilepsy doctor can be found at the National Epilepsy Foundation site at www.epilepsyfoundation.org. They can also be reached at 1-800-EFA-1000.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tricia, thanks for sharing this information with our listeners today.

[Dr. Price] Thank you, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] That's it for this week's show. Be sure and join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Dr. Robert Gaynes for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO, 24/7.