

Raising awareness of epilepsy

The Health Column

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This week we are celebrating Purple Day, an international grassroots effort dedicated to increasing awareness about epilepsy worldwide.

Around the world people are invited to wear purple and host events in support of epilepsy awareness. Epilepsy affects more than 65 million people worldwide (more than multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and Parkinson's disease combined).

However, many people in the general public know little about this disease and much of what they do know is incorrect. Purple Day has a long-term aim of helping us to improve the lives of those with epilepsy by promoting epilepsy awareness and making sure that everyone has the facts.

Purple Day was founded in 2008, by nine-year-old Cassidy Megan of Nova Scotia, Canada, with the help of the Epilepsy Association of Nova Scotia (EANS). Cassidy chose the colour purple after the international colour for epilepsy, lavender. The lavender flower is also often associated with solitude, which is representative of the feelings of isolation many people affected by epilepsy and seizure disorders often feel. Cassidy's goal is for people with epilepsy everywhere to know they are not alone.

Before starting Purple Day, Cassidy said: "I was afraid to tell people about my epilepsy because I thought they would make fun of me. After the Epilepsy Association of Nova Scotia did a presentation in my class, I started to talk with the other kids about my seizures. That is when I decided to become a spokesperson for kids with epilepsy. I called it Purple Day after the international colour for epilepsy lavender."

Many people do not understand exactly what epilepsy is. To say a person has epilepsy simply means that a person has shown a tendency to have recurring seizures. Therefore, when a person has a single seizure this does not necessarily mean that they have epilepsy.



Photo by: Gölin Doorneweerd | sxc.hu

It is estimated that approximately 50% of people who have one seizure go on to have more seizures. For people at risk of recurring seizures, approximately 70% can expect a seizure.

Epilepsy is a disorder of brain function that takes the form of recurring convulsive or non-convulsive seizures. Epilepsy is not just one condition; rather it is a diverse family of disorders comprising many seizure types.

10% of the population are at risk of experiencing a seizure during their lifetime, while 3-4% will go on to be diagnosed with epilepsy.

There are seizures that are not epileptic such as those that result from diabetes, kinked blood vessels and a range of other health conditions.

According to Epilepsy Australia, it is a common condition in our community and can develop at any age, regardless of gender or ethnic group. Research suggests that 3-4% of the Australian population will develop epilepsy at some stage in their lives.

Epilepsy was once considered a disorder of the young as it was believed that most people experienced their first seizure before the age of 20. However, the over 55 years' age group is now being recognised as being the most vulnerable. This rapidly growing demographic group is subject to the kinds of cerebrovascular, respiratory and cardiac events that can lead to epileptic seizures.

Current research has identified that in many cases of epilepsy in very young children, genetics play an important role. But genetics can be a factor in developing epilepsy at any age. It appears that certain people are simply more prone to having seizures than others. This is, at times, described as having a 'low-seizure threshold'.

A history of seizures in the family makes it more likely for them to develop epilepsy. Your pharmacy, your health destination, is where you can discuss this condition with your pharmacist. In addition, your local Self Care pharmacy has an *Epilepsy* fact card to help. For the location of the nearest pharmacy where you can pick up those Self Care fact cards, phone the Pharmaceutical Society on 1300 369 772 or log on to the website at www.psa.org.au and click on Self Care Pharmacy Finder.