

Raising awareness of epilepsy

The Health Column

22 Mar
2017

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

At one stage it was believed that epilepsy was a disorder of the young, as it appeared most people experienced their first seizure before the age of 20. However, people over 55 are now recognised as being the most vulnerable. This rapidly growing demographic group is subject to the kinds of cerebrovascular (circulation of blood to the brain), respiratory and cardiac events that can lead to epileptic seizures.



There are many causes of epilepsy, which vary with the age at which seizures begin and the nature of the seizures. However, in 50% of cases, the cause is unknown.

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

It is more likely for people to develop epilepsy if there is a history of seizures in the family. Epilepsy is estimated to affect 65 million people worldwide (more than multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy and Parkinson's disease combined).

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. Some 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.

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.

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 seizure control with medicine.

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

This week, on March 26, we celebrate Purple Day, an international grassroots effort dedicated to increasing awareness about epilepsy worldwide.

People around the world are invited to wear purple and host events in support of epilepsy awareness. Many people in the general public know little about this disease and much of what they do know is incorrect. Purple Day aims to encourage people to talk about epilepsy, and remind people living with seizures that they are not alone.

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 said: 'I was afraid to tell people about my epilepsy because I thought they would make fun of me.' Cassidy's goal is for people with epilepsy everywhere to know they are not alone.

Your local pharmacy can help too. One of the key aspects to managing epilepsy is medicine management. Pharmacists are medicines experts and can assist you with understanding how your medicines work and any possible side effects.

You can get more detailed information on epilepsy from the Self Care Fact Card titled *Epilepsy*, available from pharmacies providing the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.