



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Encountering Epilepsy

National Epilepsy Awareness Month — November 2010

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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 a common brain disorder caused by abnormal activity in brain cells and characterized by recurring seizures.

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

[Dr. Price] Thank you, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tricia, how common is epilepsy in the U.S.?

[Dr. Price] Epilepsy is one of the most common chronic neurological disorders. About two million people in the U.S. are affected by it.

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

[Dr. Price] Well, it can certainly occur at any age, but it's more common in young children, especially those under two years of age, and older adults, those over 65.

[Dr. Gaynes] What causes epilepsy?

[Dr. Price] It's important to say up front that having a single seizure, for example, one that's caused by a temporary medical condition, such as a high fever, low blood sugar, or immediately following a brain concussion, doesn't mean you have epilepsy. However, there are a number of causes of epilepsy, that's recurring seizures. They include severe head injuries, serious brain infections, and birth injuries. And strokes that occur in later life can cause epilepsy. Some types of epilepsy are related to genetic disorders and, in many cases though, the cause is still unknown.

[Dr. Gaynes] What are the signs of epilepsy? How would you know someone has it?

[Dr. Price] There's really no one look to a seizure because there are so many types of seizures. Some affect the entire brain and some affect only part of the brain. Those that affect the entire brain can result in what people typically think of as a convulsion, that is, the person loses consciousness, falls to the ground, experiences muscle stiffness and jerking. However, this type of seizure can also manifest simply as periods of staring and unresponsiveness. When only one

part of the brain is involved, a person may act confused, be unable to communicate, or exhibit behaviors, for example, wandering, that are inappropriate to time and place.

[Dr. Gaynes] What should you do if you encounter someone who appears to be having a seizure?

[Dr. Price] Well it's best to focus on keeping the person safe until the seizure stops by itself. A few things you can do to help someone who's having what people commonly think of as a convulsion, include clearing the area around the person of anything hard or sharp to prevent injury. Putting something soft and flat, like a folded jacket, under the person's head, if he's on the ground, will help. What you don't want to do is hold the person down or try to stop his movements. And certainly do not put anything in the person's mouth. Contrary to popular belief, a person *cannot* swallow their tongue. If the seizure lasts longer than five minutes without signs of slowing down, or if he's having a difficult recovery, consider it an emergency and call 9-1-1.

[Dr. Gaynes] Can epilepsy be cured?

[Dr. Price] Well, unfortunately, there are only a few types of epilepsy at present which can be cured. Epilepsy can often be treated successfully with medication, diet, nerve stimulating devices, or surgery. There are opportunities for prevention, too. These would include wearing bicycle helmets to prevent head injuries and preventing falls in older adults, vaccinations to lessen the likelihood of serious childhood disease, and adequate prenatal care to avoid problems during pregnancy and childbirth.

[Dr. Gaynes] Tricia, where can listeners get more information about epilepsy?

[Dr. Price] A number of federal agency and national organization sites offer excellent information about epilepsy; I'm going to mention just two. Information about the CDC epilepsy program can be found at www.cdc.gov/epilepsy. Another excellent site for all types of information about epilepsy, and even help in finding an epilepsy doctor, can be found at the National Epilepsy Foundation site at www.epilepsyfoundation.org.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, Tricia. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. Patricia Price about the common brain disorder known as epilepsy.

Remember - If someone is having a seizure, clear the area around them and don't put anything in their mouth. And if you or someone you know has had a seizure, get an evaluation by a doctor experienced in recognizing and treating people with epilepsy.

Until next time, 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.