



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Epilepsy Awareness

National Epilepsy Awareness Month — November 2009

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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 neurologic disorder that is characterized by unprovoked seizures. About two and a half million people in the U.S. are currently diagnosed with this condition.

Dr. David Thurman is a researcher with CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. He's joining us today to discuss recognition and treatment of epilepsy. Welcome to the show, David.

[Dr. Thurman] Thank you, Bob.

[Dr. Gaynes] David, is epilepsy more common in any particular age group?

[Dr. Thurman] Well, epilepsy occurs throughout life, however, there are two groups that more commonly are likely to develop it, and that would be very young children – epilepsy arises particularly frequently in that age group – and also in older adults.

[Dr. Gaynes] Do we know what causes epilepsy?

[Dr. Thurman] There are a number of known causes of epilepsy and in many cases, the cause still remains unknown. Among the known causes of epilepsy would be things like previous brain injuries or head injuries, in older people – consequences of a stroke brain. Less commonly it can sometimes arise because of a brain tumor, and there are a number of other causes, as well. And quite a number of cases are also associated with some identified genetic problems.

[Dr. Gaynes] David, besides convulsions, are there any other symptoms of epilepsy?

[Dr. Thurman] Yes, there are. Most people, when they think of seizures, the first thing that comes to mind is a convulsion, and I think we're all familiar with this – a person loses consciousness, they may fall down, there may be general muscle stiffening, and so forth, but in fact, there are a number of other kinds of seizures, as well, and these are probably equally as common as convulsions. And the most common other type of seizure might be something like a staring spell, during which a person is unresponsive for a short period of time.

[Dr. Gaynes] Is there a cure for this condition?

[Dr. Thurman] For the most part, at the present time, no. There's a lot of research going into developing cures for epilepsy, but there are few cases of epilepsy at the present time that we are really able to cure. Sometimes, there is an underlying condition, like scar tissue in the brain or a tumor that can be removed and sometimes that will essentially cure the epilepsy, but that's relatively less common.

[Dr. Gaynes] Is epilepsy associated with other health problems?

[Dr. Thurman] Epilepsy can be associated with a number of health problems and complications. A young child with epilepsy who's having very frequent and uncontrolled seizures, of course may, just from the fact of having so many seizures, be encountering learning difficulties and this can contribute to a developmental delay. People with seizures, of course, can be at greater risk of injury occurring during a seizure. There are also associated neurologic conditions that can occur with epilepsy and epilepsy can be a symptom of these. For example, in young children, cerebral palsy is often associated with epilepsy. And in older people, epilepsy can arise as a complication of strokes or other neurologic diseases, as well.

[Dr. Gaynes] What's the treatment for epilepsy?

[Dr. Thurman] The mainstay of treatment would be taking medication. There are several types of medication that can control seizures. About two thirds of people on medication, their seizures can be completely controlled. Now, for those whose seizures cannot be completely controlled, sometimes surgery can help.

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

[Dr. Thurman] One of the best places to go would be the CDC website: www.cdc.gov/epilepsy. And I might add, at this website, we also have a link to the National Institutes of Health epilepsy website and that has some excellent information there, as well.

[Dr. Gaynes] Thanks, David. I've been talking today with CDC's Dr. David Thurman about recognition and treatment of epilepsy which is important to avoid the risk of disability or even death. Currently, there is no cure, but epilepsy can be controlled with medication. If you or someone you know has had a seizure, see your healthcare provider to determine the cause and get appropriate treatment.

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.