

Media Release

Living well with epilepsy

Epilepsy Awareness Week 11-17 May 2009

The link between epilepsy and genius has been one of much debate for centuries, with people like Leonardo da Vinci, Vincent van Gogh, Socrates and Plato all thought to have had the condition.

However, while most people who have epilepsy wouldn't necessarily think chronic seizures enhanced their intellectual capabilities, it is well understood that having epilepsy need not be a barrier to leading a normal life.

Despite the fact that epilepsy is one of the oldest medical conditions ever recorded, dating back centuries, and many important medical advances have been made in recent years, there is still little known about epilepsy and it is one of the most stigmatised conditions in our community.

It is estimated that up to 104,000 people in Victoria will have a seizure at some stage in the life. While it was previously thought that epilepsy was a childhood condition, it is now known that seizures can occur at any age and can be caused by trauma such as a head injury or stroke. Epilepsy is becoming more common in people over the age of 65, so the prevalence is expected to rise as our population ages.

While the commonly held view of an epileptic seizure is the type where a person falls to the ground and stiffens, with uncontrollable jerking of the limbs, known as tonic clonic seizures, there are in fact many different forms of epilepsy which cause varying types of seizures and symptoms that affect people in vastly different ways.

An accurate classification of seizures is difficult. However, there are roughly two types of epilepsy – the partial or focal type, which affects one part of the brain and hence the part of the body controlled by that part of the brain, and generalised seizures, which affect the whole of the brain and therefore impact on the whole of the body.

Partial seizures can be either simple (meaning no loss of consciousness) or complex (meaning the person experiences a loss of consciousness), but each of these usually only lasts for a few seconds up to a couple of minutes.

Generalised seizures can range from those known as absence seizures, a mild type of seizure where, for example, a child might simply appear vague or distracted for a few seconds, which is often so mild that a parent or teacher might not even notice it, or seizures that cause a loss of consciousness for a few minutes, right up to the more severe tonic clonic seizures.

Regardless of the type of epilepsy its effects can be devastating, impacting on a child's learning and development at school and home, or on an adult's ability to work, drive a car or engage in normal social activities.

However, a diagnosis of epilepsy doesn't have to mean the end of a normal life. Up to 80 percent of people who are diagnosed with epilepsy will be able to control and manage their seizures well with the right medication, time and patience. Others will have ongoing seizures and will need to learn to manage their condition and minimise the risks associated with regular seizures.

Simple precautions should be taken like not swimming without someone being present and avoiding certain occupations such as piloting an aircraft, operating machinery or driving a truck. Some people who are prone to falling may need to wear a helmet to avoid head injuries.

It is also vital that a person with epilepsy follows the regulations regarding driving and avoids driving until their seizures are under control and they have been seizure-free for the prescribed time. They will also need a medical report from their doctor in order to apply to regain their licence, in line with VicRoads guidelines.

There are a number of steps a person with epilepsy can take in order to control and manage their epilepsy, such as ensuring they take their medication regularly and as prescribed, as missing a dose can trigger a seizure. They should also strive to have a healthy lifestyle and avoid alcohol and getting stressed or overtired.

Simple things like exercise, yoga and meditation can help. It is also worthwhile maintaining a seizure diary and recording the date, time and details of what happened before, during and after each seizure. This can help spot triggers and will be useful information for medical professionals.

The Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria is available to help with support and advice, providing services to people with epilepsy and their families including information and counselling to lessen the impact on their lives. The Foundation also engages in advocacy on behalf of people with epilepsy and research into its effects.

Importantly, the Foundation wants to raise awareness of epilepsy to reduce the stigma in the community. It aims to have one person in every household aware of what to do in the event someone has a seizure.

"A large part of our work is about raising awareness of epilepsy and reducing the social stigma attached to it, so that people have a better chance of being accepted in the community and getting on with life in a more positive way," says Graeme Shears, chief executive officer of the Foundation.

People with epilepsy or their families can call the Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria for assistance on 9805 9111 or the National Epilepsy Helpline 1300 852 853 for the cost of a local call, or visit www.epinet.org.au

Epilepsy Awareness Week will take place from Monday 11 May to Sunday 17 May 2009. The aim is to raise awareness of epilepsy and reduce the stigma in the community about the condition.

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