

UNDERSTANDING EPILEPSY

By Dino Ray V. Directo II
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It is one of the world's most misunderstood illnesses. Times was when people considered it mystical, even demonic in some instances. In this day and age, when mankind is already exploring beyond the boundaries of space and science, it is unfortunate how some people regard epilepsy as a curse or a psychiatric abnormality.

In medical terms, epilepsy is caused by temporary abnormalities in electrical activities inside the brain. Such disturbances result in a change in an individual's sensation, movement, awareness or behavior. This abnormality in brain currents is what triggers an epileptic seizure.

Picture the brain as a switchboard, wherein both incoming and outgoing calls are processed. Incoming calls from the arms and legs tell the brain about temperature, pressure and pain. Outgoing calls from the brain dictates how the body will react, what muscle to use, where to look, and whether to increase or decrease the heart rate.

During a seizure, an epileptic may feel, move, think or act differently. This is because a seizure can temporarily disturb the many functions of the human brain, which include consciousness, personality, mood, memory, behavior, sensations and movement. "Some people may not be aware that they are having a seizure. Others experience a warning or while some may feel a little bit different," relates Josephine Gutierrez, M.D.

Once a seizure begins, an epileptic loses control of one or more of the brain's functions such as muscle activity and awareness of surroundings. "Some patients may fall, stare blankly at you or make jerking movements of the arms and legs," adds Gutierrez.

An epileptic seizure may look frightening to people because the patient also loses bladder or bowel control. Frothing of the mouth, biting of the lips and shallowness of breathing are also common during seizures.

"In my case, I feel a shaking sensation going through my body. Then I faint and totally blank out," relates 24-year old Christina del Rosario-Castro, who found out that she had epilepsy at age 11. "It happened one morning while frying bacon for my older brother. At first I thought that it was due to hunger. The next thing I remember was waking up in front of my family as I laid on the floor," she adds.

When confronted with a patient suffering an epileptic attack, Dr. Gutierrez says that the best thing to do is leave the patient be. "You might do more harm than good. An attack usually lasts for only a few seconds," she says.

Understanding Seizures

There are various types of seizures, with the grand mal (convulsive) and the petit mal (staring spells) being the most common. The book, *Epilepsy: A Guide to Living Well*, published by the Mosby Consumer Health, reveals that there are actually 20 different types of seizures, and a person with epilepsy may have more than one kind.

Seizures actually fall into two broad categories: generalized seizures, which involve the whole brain and partial seizures, which involve only a portion of the brain. These terms refer to how much of the brain is involved in the abnormal electrical activity.

Medical experts have identified six major types of seizures: Tonic-clonic, Absence, Complex Partial, Simple Partial, Atonic and Myoclonic. Often referred to as grand mal, Tonic-clonic seizures are the most frightening. Just before the actual seizure, the individual may give a brief cry or gasp, which is

briefly followed by rigidity. "The person falls down unconscious and becomes rigid all over, drools and due to shallow breathing, the person's face may turn blue. Once he or she wakes up, the person may be confused, a bit drowsy and may have a headache," explains Gutierrez.

In an Absence attack, individuals briefly lose awareness of their surroundings. "You will know that a patient is in seizure because there's a blank stare, rapid blinking and chewing like motion," says Gutierrez.

A Complex Partial seizure makes the patient look confused or trance like. The person is totally unaware or unresponsive. He may pick at objects, remove clothing and at times, may run or appear afraid.

In a Simple Partial seizure, the patient suffers a jerking motion in one area of the body and is totally aware of the occurrence. He may feel a variety of emotions and may feel nauseated.

One of the most dangerous seizures which may cause physical harm to the patient is the Atonic or drop seizure. During the attack, the patient loses muscle tone, hence, his inability to support his own weight.

The last major attack ever documented is the Myoclonic seizure. Patients who have experienced Myoclonic seizure describe the attack as having brief shocks in the arms, legs and face.

According to Dr. Gutierrez, majority of seizures can be controlled as long as medications are taken religiously. "The ratio is 80 to 85 percent controllable. Epileptics can consult with neurologists, pediatric neurologists, pediatricians, internists and family physicians who provide treatment for epilepsy," she adds.

For Castro, it took her 5 years before finding the right medicine. "It was a case of trial and error. Some of the medicines had no effect on me. It was an expensive process," she says. At present, Castro's maintenance dose is pegged at P4,000 a month. Her medication has limited the incidence of seizures to once or twice a year.

As a complimentary measure to control a seizure, medical experts have outlined control measures and have identified certain factors that can trigger an epileptic attack. "We call them seizure triggers. These triggers do not cause seizures, but they lower a person's seizure threshold thereby increasing their risk of an attack," relates Gutierrez. The common seizure triggers are: missed medication, lack of sleep, drug abuse, alcohol intake, caffeine, herbal remedies, menstrual cycles, lights and patterns, nutritional balance, stress, fevers, colds, infections, and non-prescription drugs.

Normal People

Epilepsy is one of the world's most common brain disorders. It does not isolate any race or country. In the United States, there are two million people with epilepsy. According to the Philippine League Against Epilepsy (PLAE), more than 50 million people Worldwide have been documented to be afflicted with epilepsy.

In the Philippines, an estimated 750,000 are reportedly affected by this condition. "Majority of these are children or adults in the most productive years of their lives. About one of three people with epilepsy develops the condition by the age of 18. More than half of all people with epilepsy develop symptoms before they reach 25," says Gutierrez. Majority of epileptics lead normal and active lives. "Its all a matter of adjusting your lifestyle and proper time management," adds Castro.

For about a year and a half now, Castro has never had a seizure. In fact, she even goes to the gym and drives herself around town unaccompanied.

If there's one battle epileptics have to contend with is the awareness of Philippine society. To the afflicted individual and those people around him, this brain disorder is very disturbing and frightening. It is further compounded by misconceptions and lack of knowledge about epilepsy, its

treatment and the fear of being tagged as a social outcast. Access to proper treatment is being hindered by these factors. Epileptics are left with minimal choices.

"If there's one thing I hate about is our culture. Filipinos tend to laugh at people with epilepsy. We are depicted as a comical relief on TV and in movies. The problem is, they do not know what we have to go through." Castro intimates.

Epileptics are normal people. Epilepsy should not be regarded as a definitive line that restricts social movement in a modern society. Down the years, epileptics have prominently figured in world history. Julius Ceasar, Alexander the Great and Napoleon Bonaparte were epileptics. Other figures which were afflicted with epilepsy include the inventor of the light bulb and General Electric Cofounder Thomas Edison, composer Peter Tchaikovsky, baseball player Greg Walker, champion cyclist Marion Clignet and Hollywood actor Danny Glover. This only goes o show that epilepsy is not a hindrance to living a normal life.