

EPILEPSY

Every day is a struggle

Unpredictable symptoms can manifest in many ways

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ARTICULATE, affable and happily married, Mary-Anne (not her real name) looks like a carefree middle-aged woman.

But appearances can be deceiving. Beneath her upbeat exterior, Mary-Anne struggles with epilepsy. The neurological disorder came into the spotlight recently, after a 13-year-old sufferer with H1N1 infection died two weeks ago.

Diagnosed at 13 after she started hearing "strange, beeping noises" in her ear, Mary-Anne, 30, is one of approximately 20,000 people in Singapore suffering from epilepsy. For the past 17 years, she has lived through each day not knowing when a seizure will occur.

Once viewed as a mark of demonic possession, epilepsy is caused by a temporary electrical disturbance in the brain.

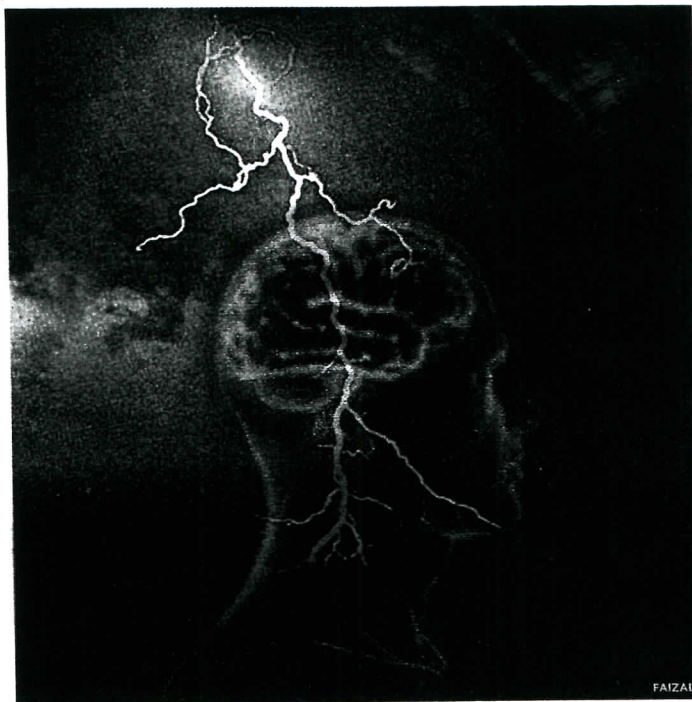
"For a short time, the brain does not work the way it usually does. The body gets the wrong signals and triggers seizures," explained clinical associate professor Ong Hian Tat, a senior consultant at National University Hospital's University Children's Medical Institute. He added that, like a sneeze, an epileptic seizure cannot be stopped once it starts.

In 70 per cent of the cases, there is no known cause, although certain physical conditions and environments, such as lack of sleep, illness or flickering lights, may trigger seizures. For the remaining 30 per cent, said Assoc Prof Ong, the reason may be severe head injuries, stroke, brain infection such as meningitis, brain tumour or brain damage caused by a difficult birth.

SEIZURES OCCUR IN DIFFERENT FORMS
The types of seizures range from brief episodes of staring or blanking out to violent convulsions. "Depending on where the electrical disturbance occurs in the brain, the symptoms can manifest in many ways during a seizure," said Dr Andrew Pan, a consultant neurologist and epileptologist at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre.

"For instance, if it affects the part of the brain that controls vision or hearing, the person may see images or hear sounds that are not real," added Dr Pan, who is also a medical advisor to the Singapore Epilepsy Foundation.

The seizures Mary-Anne experiences — called complex partial seizures — are relatively mild, compared with what some epilepsy sufferers have to endure. In one of



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the worst scenarios, a person experiencing tonic-clonic seizures loses consciousness, falls, stiffens and convulses violently. He may also lose control of his bladder or bowels.

Mary-Anne relies on daily anti-epileptic medication to control her seizures. It's the prescribed treatment for the majority of adult cases. Even so, the unpredictability of her seizures means that she has to take precautions while engaging in simple activities. Or avoid them altogether.

"Epilepsy has certainly kept my parents and husband very busy because they have to ensure that I am safe. While doing things such as swimming, cooking or crossing the road, I have to make sure that someone is with me," she said. People with epilepsy are also prohibited from driving in Singapore under the current Road Traffic Act.

LIVING WITH EPILEPSY, AND ITS STIGMA
Besides the unpredictability of the seizures, doctors TODAY spoke to said patients like Mary-Anne also have to grapple with the stigma attached to their condition.

"Epilepsy has a bad image. There's a lot of misconception and fear surrounding it," said Dr Pan. "Until today, people still think it is contagious or that everyone with epilepsy falls to the ground, convulses and foams at the mouth during a seizure. Because of this, many

patients have difficulty finding a job."

For young sufferers, growing up with the condition can be especially difficult.

According to Assoc Prof Ong, babies and children with epilepsy make up about 0.5 to 1 per cent of the population.

He said it is not uncommon for people with epilepsy, especially children, to develop behavioural and emotional problems.

"Sometimes, these problems are caused by embarrassment or frustration associated with epilepsy. Other problems may result from bullying, teasing, or peers avoiding them in school and other social settings," said Assoc Prof Ong. He added that aside from their condition, children with epilepsy are like everyone else. Many have normal or above-average intelligence.

Mary-Anne, who is in the social work field, said that she had to work harder than her peers to obtain her master's degree because the medications she took affected her memory and concentration.

"Because of my condition, I had to study and work doubly hard in school. In a way, I also wanted to prove that people with epilepsy can do just as well in life," she said.

For more information on the condition, call Singapore Epilepsy Foundation at 6334 4302 or visit www.epilepsy.com.sg.

FACT OR MYTH? You should put an object, such as a spoon, in the mouth of a person having a seizure to prevent them from biting or swallowing their tongue.

This is a common misconception, said consultant neurologist and epileptologist Dr Andrew Pan, who has seen novel items such as handphones shoved down the throat of a person having a seizure.

"Do not place anything into the person's mouth," he said. "Simply turn the person on his side, so the tongue doesn't block his breathing passage." He advised calling an ambulance if the seizure continues for more than five minutes. Most fits last two to three minutes.

HEALTH LISTINGS

KNEE INJURIES

A physiotherapist will talk about the common mistakes made while doing knee exercises and guide participants through a series of knee strengthening and stretching exercises.

Date/Time: Aug 12, 3pm to 5pm
Venue: Wings, 9 Bishan Place, Junction 8 Office Tower #06-05
Fee/Registration: \$16. Registration required. Call 6250 1012. Open to women aged 40 and above only.


WEIGHING YOUR OPTIONS

Is there really such a thing as a miracle diet or perfect exercise regimen? Find out more from the experts at Singapore General Hospital. They will also shed light on health issues such as cholesterol and weight-reducing surgery.

Date/Time: Aug 15, 4pm to 5pm
Venue: DBS Auditorium, DBS Tower 1, Level 3, 6 Shenton Way
Fee/Registration: \$5. Registration by Aug 12. Call 6326 5285 or email pgml.pf@sgh.com.sg.

Saturday August 8th

A Seminar & Lecture by:
JIRO IMAI, Ph.D.
(Pharmaceutical Science)
Chief Lecturer, International HQ of Happy Science Tokyo, Japan
Former Research Scientist at National Institute of Health (NIH), USA



What is the source of human illness?

Change your Thoughts to Overcome Illness

What does illness reveal about our life?

True medicine is neither western medicine, which relies on drugs and outpaces the diseased part, nor eastern medicine, such as Chinese medicine, acupuncture and feng shui. The speaker will disclose important secrets to prevent illness and improve health by correcting distortion of the mind for both the sick and healthy. Let us restore true health by making the most of modern medicine and the wisdom based on the Laws of the mind. (Seminar conducted in English)

As seats are very limited, please register now by SMS/phone or email, providing your name, email address, phone no. & home address (optional).

FREE ADMISSION

8 Aug 2009 (Sat)
2pm - 5pm

Venue:
Singapore Management University
(near to City Hall MRT Station - Exit A)
Classroom 2.1 (Level 2)
Lee Kong Chian School of Business
50 Stamford Road,
577829

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