What It's Like to Have a

Silent Epilepsy

For some patients diagnosis and treatment can prove difficult, but epilepsy specialists are working to help them.

For three years Merissa was trying to find out what was wrong with her. It all started with vague symptoms—sudden episodes of dizziness, numbness in her arms and legs and a bizarre tingling sensation throughout her body. The sensations were hard to describe, but she had a strong intuition that something serious was going on.

Numerous visits to general physicians and neurologists, and multiple tests and MRI scans turned up nothing. Some doctors even told her that her symptoms were all in her head, likely just due to anxiety. But as she went from doctor to doctor, the unpredictable attacks got worse and started to happen more frequently. A mother of two young children in Nevada, Merissa became so worried about her mysterious symptoms that she stopped herself from driving.

Eventually, one of Merissa's doctors tested her for multiple sclerosis (MS), because someone else in her family had the neurological condition. That turned out to be a red herring—the tests didn't show the telltale signs of MS. Instead, what was happening to Merissa always happened in sudden, intermittent episodes, almost like seizures. So she was referred to Dr. Samir Bangalore, a neurologist at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center and the only epilepsy specialist in the state of Nevada.

A couple of tests later, it turned out that Merissa indeed had epilepsy.

Epilepsy is the fourth most common neurological disorder and affects about 1 percent of adults aged 18 years or older and about 0.6 percent of children, or roughly 3 million people in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Epilepsy is characterized by unpredictable seizures, caused by abnormal firing of brain cells that lead to a sudden surge of electrical activity throughout the brain.

Contrary to popular belief, epilepsy does not always involve the dramatic convulsive seizures often depicted on TV. Depending on where in the brain a seizure originates, what happens during it can take many forms, ranging from momentary lapses of attention or experiencing a déjà vu to odd sensations in the body and muscle jerks. Because of the variability of symptoms, sometimes it is difficult to diagnose the patient. A kid whose seizures cause staring spells may be misdiagnosed with ADHD, or someone like Merissa may be incorrectly tested for other neurological conditions such as MS, because of the similarity of symptoms.

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"Anyone who is worried they might have epilepsy should see a neurologist or at least a primary care doctor," Dr. Bangalore said. "Factors that tell you it's not just daydreaming or a normal part of daily life is that the episodes are typically long, several seconds or even a minute or two. They are not something that you can quickly step out of."

To diagnose Merissa, Dr. Bangalore first looked at her brain's electrical activity, using electroencephalography (EEG). The initial EEG tests last only about an hour and can pick up on abnormal electrical activity in the brain.

"People with epilepsy may have abnormal electrical discharges even when they are not having a seizure. It is these discharges we look for on an EEG. Just like an abnormal beat in a person's heart rhythm may suggest an electrical problem in the heart, it doesn't mean a person is having a heart attack right then," Dr. Bangalore said.

The diagnosis was a relief. Merissa now knew what was wrong, and could do something about it. She went on medications for epilepsy, which is the first treatment option for the condition, Dr. Bangalore said.

Although there are many medications for epilepsy, about a third of patients do not fully respond to them and their seizures continue to occur frequently, affecting their quality of life. For some of those patients, brain surgery may be an option.

"Surgery is a good option for people whose seizures start in one specific part of their brain which can be isolated and removed without damaging other sensitive areas of brain nearby," Dr. Bangalore said.

Moreover, several tests are performed to evaluate whether that part of the brain underlies any vital function. "We make maps of people's brains and circle the area on the map where the seizure starts and circle other areas of the brain that they use for language, movement, vision, and memory," Dr. Bangalore said. "If the brain area that gives rise to the seizures is not useful for any important function, then that person is a good surgical candidate."

Merissa underwent surgery and had a good outcome. A few months later, she was back to normal. On her first night of being able to drive again, she took her children out to get ice cream.

Even people who aren't candidates for brain surgery may benefit from seeing an epilepsy specialist. "There are other non-surgical options, such as additional medication trials, neuro stimulation with medical devices, dietary maneuvers and medical marijuana. An epilepsy specialist has more information about such alternative options."

Dr. Bangalore's advises medical professionals to act swiftly and avoid a long process of trial and error when a patient doesn't respond to the first few regimens of medications. "Once a patient has failed one or two regimens of epilepsy medications, it's very unlikely that another regimen will work after that," Dr. Bangalore said. "They need to see a specialist and have an epilepsy surgery evaluation or explore other options."

ABOUT US:

The Epilepsy Center at Sunrise Hospital, with a dedicated Chief Epileptologist, is the only center of its kind in Nevada offering:

- *Evaluation of patients with epilepsy*
- *Epilepsy monitoring unit with specialized staff and nursing*
- *Advanced brain imaging (CT, MRI, PET)*
- *Wada testing (language and memory mapping)*
- *Neuropsychological testing and evaluation*
- *Surgical treatment of epilepsy*

The Epilepsy Center is a state-of-the-art monitoring facility with:

- *Four hospital rooms equipped with devices for long-term brain monitoring using audio and video*
- *Advanced brain mapping of seizures and brain function*

The Epilepsy Center is part of the Nevada Neurosciences Institute at Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center

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