



Health Notes

from the Lilydale Pharmacy

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a disruption of the regular electrical impulses in the brain – a surge in brain waves that results in so-called fits or seizures.

Many centuries ago the Babylonians first described epilepsy as the “falling down disease” – a fairly reasonable description; but they also believed it affected people who were possessed by demons and ghosts.

During the Middle Ages, it was thought that epilepsy was a contagious disease. The ancient Greek physicians led by Hippocrates were less superstitious, although they did believe epilepsy was passed on through families from one generation to the next. Of course, epilepsy is not contagious, nor is it really a disease. We now know that there are genetic causes, but there are many other causes too; and in about half the cases the actual cause is not known.

Actually, there are several types of epilepsy. In the so-called “tonic-clonic” epilepsy, which used to be known as grand mal, the person falls, goes stiff, and shakes all over. They may be unconscious for several minutes. This is probably the typical image of epilepsy.

“Absence” seizures (petit mal) are like a blank spell. The person stops what they are doing and just stares for between 5 and 30 seconds. This type of seizure occurs mainly in primary school age children. The child may have problems paying attention in class resulting in learning difficulties.

“Complex Partial” seizures are probably the most misunderstood because this form of epilepsy can be mistaken for drunkenness or drug abuse, due to similar behaviour patterns. The person having one of these seizures may wander aimlessly, mumble and be glassy-eyed.

It is important to realise that epilepsy does not affect intelligence. In fact, history has shown that even without the benefit of current medications, people with epilepsy have been high achievers in their field of endeavour. Scientists Edison and Einstein, artists Van Gogh and Da Vinci, writers Socrates and Dickens and musicians Handel and Tchaikovsky are all known to have had epilepsy.

In recent years, there have been significant advances in the treatment of epilepsy with some new medicines becoming available. These medicines, usually taken in conjunction with the older preparations, can mean better control with fewer side effects.

It is also important to realise that epilepsy is not necessarily a life-long condition. If epilepsy is treated quickly and effectively as soon as it is detected, it may only need to be treated for a few years – particularly in children. If a person has been ‘fit-free’ for two years on medication, a trial without medication is often done.