EPILEPSY IN LATER LIFE

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is the most common neurological disorder affecting people of all ages. It's important to understand that epilepsy is a physical rather than mental disorder.

As you know, the brain is a highly complex and sensitive organ. Our brain cells work together, communicating via electrical signals. Occasionally there is an abnormal electrical discharge from a group of cells, resulting in a seizure. There are many different types of seizure*, which are divided into two main groups:

i) generalized seizures which occur when the disturbance is spread across all of the brain
ii) partial seizures when only part of the brain is affected.

The kind of seizures you have will depend on where in your brain the disturbance first starts and how far it spreads. Most seizures are short-lived and need no medical attention.

Why me at my age?

Epilepsy can affect anyone at any time of life. It is more usually diagnosed in people under the age of 20 or those aged over 60. Epilepsy can have many causes. However, when epilepsy is diagnosed in later life it usually occurs as a result of another condition such as a stroke, heart attack, neuro-vascular disease or a diminished supply of blood to the brain. As people are now living longer the number of those who are affected by these conditions is rising, therefore there is an increase in the number of cases of epilepsy in your age group.

Your doctor may be able to tell you more about the cause of your epilepsy. However, it is not unusual that even after extensive tests no definite cause can be identified.

Will I feel any different before or after a seizure?

Here are some of the more common feelings associated with seizures.

i) Prodrome - can precede a seizure and is a vague sensation or intensified emotion indicating a slight disturbance in the brains electrical activity. Usually this builds up over a period of hours or days before the seizure occurs.
ii) Aura - this is a brief event which may take the form of a strange taste or smell, a funny feeling or sensation. You may hear a familiar piece of music or a non-existent sound.

An aura is in fact a seizure already happening but it can serve as a useful warning that the disturbance may spread causing a major seizure with loss of consciousness. It can enable you to let someone know what is going to happen or help you to find some place where, if necessary, you can sit or lie down. After a seizure some people fell very tired and want to sleep, or ache because their muscles have worked quite hard. Sometimes people feel confused or disorientated afterwards or are forgetful.

Occasionally incontinence may occur during a seizure but advice and help isavailable. Sometimes, following a seizure people may have difficulty moving a part of their body for a short time, but this is quite rare. For many people, however,
seizures happen without warning, only last a short time and they experience no lasting ill effects. It is important to remember that each person's epilepsy ids different so each person's experience of epilepsy will be an individual one.

Are there treatments?

The majority of people with epilepsy have their seizures under control by taking anti-epileptic medication.

A good understanding of your treatment will help you get the best from it. here are some suggestions to discuss with your doctor:

i) why you are taking anti-epileptic medication and for how long will you need to take it.

ii) Some people need to take medication for many years, some for the rest of their life

iii) the importance of taking your anti-epileptic medication as prescribed.

iv) the possibility that alcohol* can reduce the effectiveness of your anti-epileptic medication.

The aim of your anti-epileptic medication is to stop your seizures without causing side effects. Some possible side effects include sleepiness, nausea, unsteadiness and slurred speech. Discuss this with your doctor if you experience any of these symptoms. For a few selected patients who do not respond to medication, surgery may be considered. Others find benefits from complementary therapies such as aromatherapy, although their effectiveness is still to be proven.

How can others help?

You are likely to feel anxious and concerned about your epilepsy and so too will your family and friends.There are practical ways, however, that your family and friends can help. A first step is for them to understand your epilepsy. A second is for them to know what to do if a seizure occurs. Some simple safety precautions can also be put in place in your home to help reduce the risk of injury.

How will I feel about my epilepsy?

It is important to make every effort to carry on as usual in your everyday activities and to continue to do the things you enjoy. Keeping busy and feeling content will have a positive effect on your epilepsy.

If you should have a seizure, life should carry on in as normal a way as possible. If worries arise about things which were not a problem before epilepsy was diagnosed, you may benefit from the experience of others who have lived with epilepsy through a local support group. If the unpredictability of seizures makes you concerned about such things as travelling, swimming or taking care of your grandchildren, you can overcome these worries by building in a few safety provisions. Some small changes can prevent you from giving up something important to you.

Coming to terms with the condition can help you feel better about yourself and restore your self-confidence which may have taken a knock.

Recording of seizures

Keeping a record in a dairy of numbers of attacks and what happens before, during and after your seizures will help your doctor in the management of your epilepsy. It will also help to give a clearer picture of the pattern your condition takes. It may also help to identify if there are any triggers for your seizures; for instance do they occur mostly when you are tired, or under stress or bored? Knowing this could help you control the seizures by avoiding or reducing these factors. Bear in mind that many people do not have any triggers or patterns to their seizures and they can occur out of the blue.

What can I expect from our family doctor?

Your own doctor is likely to be the person you will go to following your first seizure, who should refer you on to a consultant to make the diagnosis and prescribe treatment. Your ongoing care will be in the hands of your family doctor who should see you twice a year or more and refer you back to the consultant at least annually if seizures continue. If you notice any changes in your epilepsy, e.g. side effects of medication appearing, seizures increasing in severity and/or frequency, you should contact your doctor.

When you visit your family doctor or consultant it is often very helpful to take with you:

i) someone who has seen your seizures and who can give an eye witness account.
ii) your seizure diary
iii) a list of question you want to ask
iv) a list of other medications you are taking including ones bought over the counter.

Do I need to tell anyone?

This is a question many people ask. Being open about your epilepsy can prevent embarrassment and stress but some people choose not to say anything particularly if their seizures are totally controlled by medication. People you work or socialise with, friends and relatives are likely to be more understanding if you tell them about your epilepsy. They can also help you if they know what to do and what not to do when a seizure occurs and who to contact for help.

Are there safety precautions I can take?

It may be useful to keep a mobile phone at hand. Agencies such as "Fall Call" run schemes and produce aids which can be helpful. You may also wish to get a safety pillow, particularly if you have seizures during your sleep. Other precautions that may be helpful include putting gates across stairs and reinforcing glass paneled doors in your home. Swimming with a friend and informing the lifeguard at the pool is advisable if your epilepsy is not controlled.

Wearing an identity bracelet, necklace or carrying a card containing information about your epilepsy will allow people to help if you have a seizure in a public place and can give you confidence when away from home.