



erc
epilepsy RESOURCE CONNECTION

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hotline

Epilepsy Linked to Higher Suicide Risk

People with epilepsy are three times more likely to commit suicide than the general population, and women with the disease have a greater suicide risk than men, according to new research from Denmark.

The Danish study is not the first to link epilepsy to an increase in suicide, but it is the first to use a comprehensive, nationwide population registry to investigate the association.

Newly diagnosed epilepsy patients were more than five times more likely to commit suicide than patients who had been diagnosed more than six months previously. A 29-fold increase in suicide risk was seen in newly diagnosed patients with a history of psychiatric illness.

"Even when mental illness and other suicide risk factors were controlled for, people with epilepsy were at increased risk for suicide," says the study's researcher Per Sidenius, MD, of Aarhus University Hospital.

"It is clear that epilepsy patients need [mental health] support, especially immediately after a diagnosis of epilepsy."

Sidenius and colleagues compared health histories of 21,169 suicide cases occurring in Denmark between 1981 and 1997 to 423,128 people who had not committed suicide -- matched by sex and age. The suicide cases were taken from a comprehensive Danish death registry.

A total of 492 of the suicides occurred among people with epilepsy (2.32%), compared with 3,140 cases of epilepsy in the people who had not committed suicide (0.74%), corresponding to a threefold higher suicide risk among epilepsy patients.

When people with a history of psychiatric illness were excluded from the analysis and researchers adjusted for other risk factors associated with suicide, epilepsy patients were still twice as likely to commit suicide as people without epilepsy.

Women with epilepsy and a history of psychiatric disease were 23 times more likely to commit suicide than women without either condition, compared with a tenfold increase in risk among men with epilepsy and psychiatric illness.

The study is published in the August issue of the journal *Lancet Neurology*.

Sidenius says the findings point to the importance of evaluating epilepsy patients for depression and suicidal behavior and offering psychiatric treatment if needed.

"Newly diagnosed patients often have many misconceptions about the disease," he says. "They often don't understand that there are good treatments with few side effects."

Depression is more common among people with epilepsy than among the general population. Certainly, the difficulties of living with seizures can cause depression, but this does not appear to fully explain the association.

People with a history of depression, for example, have been shown to have a higher risk for developing epilepsy. And most studies have failed to show a link between severity of seizures and depression symptoms.

In 2005, researchers from Columbia University reported an increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviors in patients who later developed epilepsy. **[Continued] see Risk on back**

Key to the Classroom

How to get the best education for your child with epilepsy

Families must take the lead and educate themselves about their children's rights. Parents also need to realize they may have to be the one to educate the school, including administrators, teachers, even custodians, about their child's epilepsy.

Epileptic syndromes can involve more than 3 dozen types of seizure activity; the big myth is that they're solely about falling to the ground and shaking, says Pat Robinson, R.N., executive director of Epilepsy Foundation of Southeast Wisconsin. Those larger seizures-they used to be called "grand mal" and are now referred to as generalized tonic clonic-still occur. But the subtle ones can be more problematic in a classroom because they're easier to overlook.

During absence (pronounced ab-SAHNS) seizures, which tend to last about 8 seconds, children will often stare into space. "These students can look either engrossed or as though they're daydreaming," says Robinson. "Teachers who are untrained in recognizing the symptoms may think the child is ignoring the teacher." Another type of subtle seizure is the simple partial (occasionally this can be the beginning of a generalized tonic clonic), where the child experiences symptoms involving the senses, such as hearing noises or feeling something crawling on the skin. Fortunately, says Robinson, treatment can control more than 50% of epileptic cases.

Because children with epilepsy can experience as many as 100 or more of these 8-second absence seizures in a school day, service to these students is less about paraprofessionals and more about teachers and students being observant and educated about what to do when they see a seizure occur. Robinson describes one situation in which a teacher, untrained in these matters, fainted when a student experienced a seizure. "The students were fine," she says. "The child was having a generalized tonic clonic, and the other students knew what to do. They knew to keep the child safe, to turn him on his side, and to time the seizure. They would have also known to call on the teacher for help."

Educating teachers and students about epilepsy is a critical factor. ERC offers free in-service education to schools in the Wichita area. The instruction is based on age levels, and for younger students the content of the presentation is much more basic. "Seizure first-aid is something that should be taught as readily as CPR," Robinson says, adding that parents are the best advocates in getting into the schools.



[Continued] see School on back

Adult Epilepsy Support Group

Meets Second Tuesday of Month,
6:30 PM @ 2919 W. 2nd Street, Wichita

August 14th: "Stress of Living in Seizure Fear"
September 11th: "Group Choice"

Risk [continued from front]

The finding suggests a complex relationship between suicide, seizures, and epilepsy, says Columbia's Dale C. Hesdorffer, PhD, who led the study team.

Hesdorffer says that a common underlying brain dysfunction may link epilepsy and suicidal behavior.

"Patients with new-onset seizures should be thoroughly evaluated to determine if they have a history of major depression or suicidal behaviors," she says. "Our research suggests a common underlying predisposition for suicidal behavior and epilepsy that is, as yet, not understood." ❖ WEB MD

Schools [continued from front]



Training school nurses is also high on Robinson's priority list. Unfortunately, because the current medication to control a generalized tonic clonic is diazepam (Diasat), which is administered through the rectum, some school districts are reluctant to pursue this training for privacy reasons.

Elimination of fear in the classroom is paramount, says Robinson, and her description of one presentation made by her staff is especially poignant. "A girl in the class revealed that, up to that point, only her mother and teacher knew she had epilepsy," Robinson says. "But after the presentation the girl felt safe enough to reveal her condition. The students then told her, 'We're not afraid. We can help you.'" ❖ NEUROLOGY NOW

ERC's Glimmer Group

Halloween Carnival

Saturday, October 20, 2007

12:00 - 4:00 PM

2919 West Second St., Wichita

Families of children with epilepsy are invited to attend.

Lunch will be served



➤ Please RSVP: 316-943-2453 ◀

⊗ Face painting ⊗ The Bubble man! ⊗ Crafts ⊗ Clowns ⊗ Puppet Show ⊗ Fun Foods ⊗ Games ⊗ Magician ⊗ Prizes ⊗ Inflatables ⊗ Child ID Safety WPD Officers will be on hand

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BRAIN STORMS:

Bringing Epilepsy Stigma out of the Shadows

SAVE THIS DATE

to attend

Brain Storms 2007

Bringing Epilepsy Stigma out of the Shadows

Patient Conference

Saturday,

November 10, 2007

Wichita, KS

Could AED usage be linked to low IQ?

Children of women who took the AED (anti-epileptic drug) valproate during pregnancy appear to be at a greater risk of having a low IQ, according to research presented at the 2007 American Academy of Neurology's 59th Annual Meeting.

The study examined IQ results for 187 two-year-old children of mothers who had taken the carbamazepine, lamotrigine, phenytoin, or valproate during pregnancy.

24% of the children of mothers who took valproate showed an IQ in the learning disabilities range, compared to 12% for carbamazepine, 9% for lamotrigine, and 12% for phenytoin.

On an IQ test, children whose mothers took carbamazepine scored an average of 93 points, compared to 93 for those who took phenytoin, 96 for lamotrigine, and 84 for valproate. The scores were adjusted to account for the mother's IQ and the drug dosage.

The study also found that children with higher levels of valproate in their blood had lower IQ scores.

"Further studies are needed to confirm these findings, examine IQ at older ages, and to determine the risks for other epilepsy drugs," said the study's author, Dr. Kimford Meador of the University of Florida and Fellow of the American Academy of Neurology.

"However, our findings are consistent with other studies, which have shown valproate poses an increased risk for fetal death and birth defects, and have suggested the drug may harm cognitive development."

The study also found children's IQ was related to their mother's IQ for every epilepsy drug except valproate.

Dr. Meador recommends doctors talk with their patients about the risks associated with valproate.

"Although valproate remains an important treatment option in women who aren't able to use other epilepsy drugs, valproate should not be used as the drug of first choice for women of child bearing potential, and when used, its dosage should be limited if possible," he said. ❖ EPILEPSY ACTION