

The Doctor - Patient interview

Ms S: Doctor, I am so worried about my 15-year-old daughter. She has had spells of odd behaviour, following which she loses consciousness. This has happened five times.

Doctor: Ms S, can you please tell me when it started?

Ms S: It happened suddenly about three months ago. She mentioned an odd feeling in her stomach, and before we realized it, she had lost consciousness.

Doctor: Can you please explain a little more? Do you remember the date? What time was it? What was she doing when she complained about that feeling?

Ms S: It was about six in the evening. She had returned from school and was relaxing in a chair with a book in her hand, when all of a sudden she complained of an odd sensation in the stomach. She had a dazed look on her face and started behaving in a strange manner, clutching at the chair and the book. She didn't answer when called, and appeared to be in a dazed state of mind. This was about three months ago. But I don't remember the date.

Doctor: Did you call her by her name? Did she respond? By any chance, did you notice any movements of the lips or jaw?

Ms S: Now that you ask me, I recollect that she was muttering something. She was moving her jaw as if she was eating something! (Ms S proceeds to demonstrate the movements).

Doctor: What happened next?

Ms S: She walked around without any specific purpose, and didn't respond when called. Then suddenly, she fell down unconscious, and started moving both limbs vigorously. It was uncontrollable, like a fit. This went on for two minutes. She was frothing at the mouth, and had soiled her clothes. It was very frightening! We placed a key in her hand, but it didn't help.

Doctor: Did she hurt herself? Did she bite her tongue?

Ms S: We all held her tightly, hence, she didn't get hurt. But saliva, froth and blood were drooling from her mouth. Yes, she had bitten her tongue.

Doctor: When did she regain consciousness?

Ms S: She slept for an hour and when she woke up, she complained of muscular pain and exhaustion. She has had four such episodes in the last three months.

Doctor: When was the last attack?

Ms S: The last attack was about seven days ago.

Doctor: Did your daughter have any convulsions following fever when she was less than six years old?

Ms S: No, she did not have any such convulsions.

Doctor: Does she complain of headaches or vomiting, on and off?

Ms S: Never, but she has vomited sometimes during these episodes.

People who have experienced the above-mentioned episodes should consult a doctor. It is essential that they be accompanied by a witness who can describe the episodes in detail. More often than not, epilepsy can be diagnosed on the basis of patients' and eyewitness' reports. No laboratory test can replace a clear description provided by an eyewitness. Electroencephalography (EEG), which records electrical activity from the surface of the head (similar to the ECG for the heart) can, in some cases, support the diagnosis. Those who develop epilepsy for the first time require investigation to identify the underlying cause. These investigations include EEG, and imaging tests such as CT scan or MRI of the brain.

When epilepsy is diagnosed, it is necessary to document the type of seizure, determine the cause, and evaluate the intelligence and social background. This information is extremely useful for further patient management.