

New techniques in medicine

New epilepsy drug on NHS

A new add-on drug to reduce the number of seizures suffered by people with epilepsy is now available on the NHS, writes **Judy Hobson**

MORE THAN half a million people in the UK have epilepsy, the world's most common neurological condition.

Medication or surgery can control seizures in the majority of cases, but sadly up to 40 per cent of those with epilepsy continue to suffer them despite treatment.

The good news is that a new drug, used as an add-on treatment, has been shown in trials to reduce the number of seizures experienced by this group of patients and is now available on the NHS.

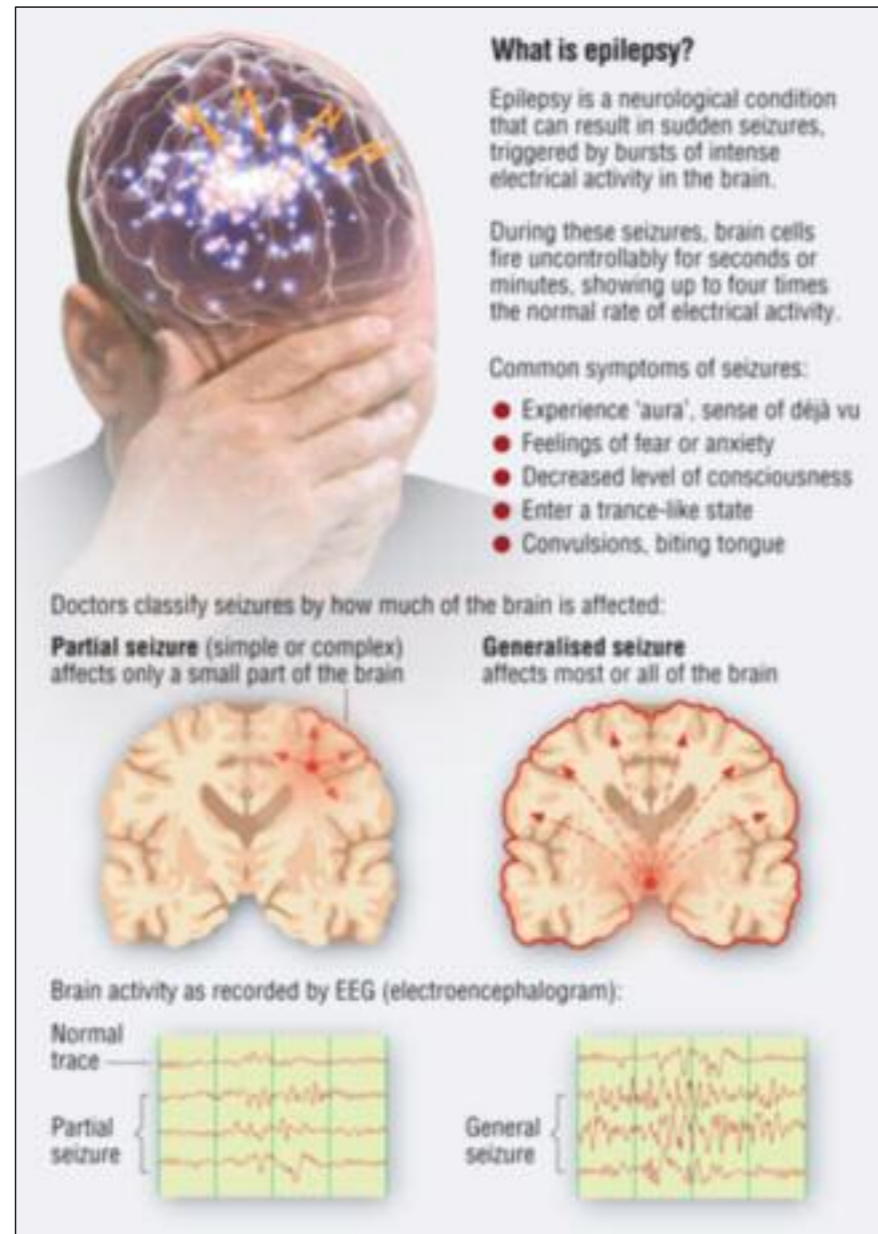
Called Briviact, the drug has been developed for the treatment of partial onset seizures (POS) with or without secondary generalised ones. In studies, it was found to halve the number of seizures for up to 40 per cent of patients.

Around 60 per cent of people with epilepsy have what are known as partial onset seizures. These start in one side of the brain but, after the initial seizure, can spread to the other side. Patients may lose consciousness and their seizure can last up to three minutes.

Often they occur without warning, making it difficult for the sufferer to lead a normal life and hold down a job. Seizures are triggered by a sudden burst of intense electrical activity in the brain.

Briviact targets a protein in the brain known as synaptic vesicle protein 2A and this is believed to prevent the release of the electrical signals responsible for a seizure.

Dr Dominic Heaney, consultant neurologist at London's National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery, says: "Partial onset seizures in older people can be the result of a mini-stroke, head injury or alcohol consumption. In younger people they may be due to congenital problems, a brain tumour, fatigue or being unwell.



Often the event doesn't last long and the patient isn't sure what happened, but these patients need to be investigated thoroughly and to have an MRI scan to find out whether they have a brain tumour.

"Diagnosing epilepsy can be

challenging. We believe up to 20 per cent of those diagnosed may not have it, while people are out there with epilepsy but remain undiagnosed."

Anti-epileptic drugs Lamotrigine and Valproate are currently being used to treat patients with POS. "These drugs,"

Dr Heaney says, "have been around for 20 years and most patients do well on them, but they fail to control the seizures in 30 per cent of cases. Briviact has been licensed to be used as an add-on medication, because you can't rely solely on a brand-new drug as a holding agent for this condition.

"But if the patient gets a lot better as a result of taking Briviact, we may be able to gradually reduce the amount of their older drug so that eventually they will end up on one medicine – the new one.

"I believe we could see this happen with Briviact within the next two to four years."

"People still don't like to reveal they have epilepsy and it is always a battle to get research funding because it is an unglamorous condition that's not well understood"

The new drug comes in tablet form and is taken twice daily. At a cost of £4.63 a day to the NHS, it is not extortionately expensive, particularly if it means the patient gets improved control of their epilepsy.

In trials, Briviact was well tolerated, with fewer than one in 20 patients reporting side-effects. The most commonly reported were drowsiness, dizziness, headache and fatigue.

However, stigma continues to surround epilepsy, which means people with the condition try to hide it and support charities find it hard to raise funds. Yet it is a common condition, affecting almost one in every 100 of us, and ten per cent of A&E admissions are for seizures.

Dr Heaney says: "People still don't like to reveal they have epilepsy and it is always a battle to get research funding because it is an unglamorous condition that's not well understood. There's also a huge variation in services for people with epilepsy across the country, which means some aren't being properly investigated and some are not being given the most appropriate treatment."

Versha Patel: Was embarrassed by her epilepsy

"I'm one of the lucky ones"

Versha Patel was 17 and had her heart set on becoming a hotel manager when she had her first epileptic seizure. At the time she did not even know what epilepsy was.

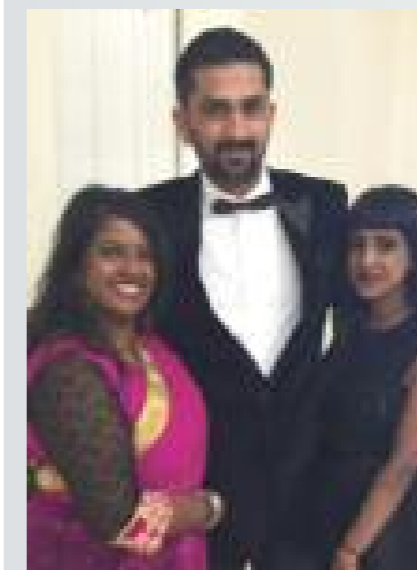
Versha, now 38, who lives with husband Manish and daughter Hannah, 16, in Bolton, Lancashire, says: "The seizure came out of nowhere. I was at Bolton Sixth Form College and talking to a friend outside the common room when I collapsed and was rushed to hospital."

There was no history of the condition in her family and an MRI scan showed no signs of a brain tumour. She was put on the anti-epileptic drug Valproate, but continued to have seizures every two years.

"Sometimes they may have occurred because I hadn't been taking my tablets. I was young, wanted a social life and not to be bogged down by tablet-taking. But seizures sap your strength and I feel really unwell afterwards, so I realised that if I wanted some kind of normal life, I needed to control them. I also recognised that getting stressed or overtired could trigger one."

Initially Versha was embarrassed by her epilepsy and worried what some of her mother's older friends would say.

"Having epilepsy is challenging because people simply don't understand it. I don't hide it any longer and always make people aware I have it, telling them it is under control."



Losing her driving licence is Versha's main worry. She lost it for a year after a major seizure in 2010.

"My mum's twin sister had died from cancer and I had to drive to and from Southampton the same day for her funeral. The next day I had a major seizure and as a result lost my licence. I need to be able to drive to do my job and to take my mum to hospital appointments."

In 2001, Versha had started working in AXA Insurance's call centre. Four years later she was promoted and in 2015 became one of its business resilience managers, which involves her driving around the country visiting AXA's offices.

Versha's last seizure was in 2013 and happened after getting the news her mother had dementia.

Later that year Versha and Manish were married.

"I was very worried about telling him I had epilepsy but he was brilliant and just asked what he should do if I had a seizure. Both he and Hannah are very supportive and try to prevent me from getting stressed about things."

In 2014 she was switched to another anti-epileptic drug – Lamotrigine.

"I feel fine on it but really welcome the news about Briviact, because more drugs should be available for epilepsy, particularly for those people who have lots of seizures. I count myself as one of the lucky ones because I've managed to build a life around my condition and, thanks to having an understanding manager, have a job."