

Clinician's Corner

Epilepsy and the Elderly

Ilo E. Leppik, M.D.

Seizures are the most common serious neurologic symptom affecting all ages. Recent studies however, have shown that a person's chance of developing epilepsy is greatest after age 65. Chances increase with age, so that persons over age 80 are two to three times more likely than a child to develop epilepsy.

Minnesota research physicians Lackner, Cloyd and Leppik studied nursing home residents ten years ago and found that, in the Twin Cities, one in ten nursing home residents were treated with the antiepileptic drugs, phenytoin (Dilantin), phenobarbital, carbamazepine (Tegretol), or valproate (Depakote). Further studies show this to be the case in the rest of the country as well. Out of the approximate 1.5 million nursing home residents in the country, 150,000 are currently being treated with antiepileptic drugs. This is important because findings show that as many as one-third of the residents being treated may be toxic or receiving too much medicine.

Since very little is known about how these drugs affect this population, Ilo Leppik, M.D. Director of Research at MINCEP[®] Epilepsy Care and James Cloyd, Pharm.D., Co-Director of the Epilepsy Clinical Research Program at the University of Minnesota are project leaders in a five-year grant awarded by the National Institute of Health to the University of Minnesota to study epilepsy in the elderly. A number of Twin Cities physicians will participate, as well as doctors from Emory University and the University of Miami. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will greatly improve the treatment of epilepsy in the elderly.

Anyone over age 65 who has epilepsy and would like to volunteer to participate in this study can call John Rarick at MINCEP Epilepsy Care at 952-525-4500 extension 347.