

Epilepsy

Jessica Hembrook

Epilepsy and seizures affect nearly 3 million Americans of all ages, at an estimated annual cost of \$17.6 billion in direct and indirect costs. Approximately 200,000 new cases of seizures and epilepsy occur each year. Ten percent of the American population will experience a seizure in their lifetime.

— Epilepsy
Foundation

There really are no outer bounds of a mother's love and drive to help her children. Jessica Hembrook of Delavan, Wisconsin, takes it in stride as she names the various medications her sons have taken in an attempt to control their epileptic seizures. Her brow furrows as she recounts the harrowing experience Garrett, her eight-year-old son, went through to get an accurate diagnosis. After nearly a year of frequent dizzy spells, unusual vomiting, and long periods where he would stare into space, Garrett was diagnosed with epilepsy on his third birthday. From there, they embarked on an exhaustive pursuit of an effective treatment. Garrett's doctors tried a series of ten different drugs, unfortunately typical for children with epilepsy, before recommending him for surgery to have a vagus nerve stimulation (VNS) device implanted in his side. In April 2009, a small device—much like a pacemaker—was implanted in Garrett's chest. A thin wire runs from the device to the vagus nerve, which extends from the brain to the abdomen. Mild intermittent stimulation induced through the use of a magnet helps regulate Garrett's brain activity to control the seizures. Jessica happily reports that the device has changed Garrett's world and allowed him to step off the merry-go-round of medications. "He's gone from having 10 to 20 seizures a day to only three seizures in the last year."

Although Jessica is pleased that Garrett has a new lease on a wonderfully typical childhood, her mind races to her more immediate concern. Jeric, Garrett's younger brother, who was diagnosed in 2010 with the same disease, has just undergone surgery to remove his gallbladder. The drugs have been hard on his system. While he can function without his gallbladder, Jeric is hardly the same little boy his mother remembers as he struggles with the side effects of various drugs. He's regressed in his schoolwork, and his usual animated self is now listless. Yet Jessica is hopeful that Jeric may soon be a candidate for the VNS therapy as well, resulting in the need for fewer medications to control his condition.

Jessica reflects over the past several years and finds it hard to remember a time in which epilepsy didn't rule her family's lives. "Why do kids have to suffer?" she asks rhetorically. She wishes that there was a magic wand which could have taken the pain and suffering away—or at the very least, a better way to determine what therapy would have been most effective to treat her sons' seizures from their initial diagnoses. Perhaps then, children like Garrett and Jeric could enjoy a wonderfully typical childhood.

Source: <http://epilepsyfoundation.org/aboutepilepsy/whatisepilepsy/statistics.cfm>