Intellectual Disabilities and Epilepsy

According to the Epilepsy Foundation, epilepsy is the fourth most common neurological disorder and affects people of all ages. In fact, 1 in 26 people have seizures and while people who are diagnosed with epilepsy may have no other problems, this is not the case for children and adults with an intellectual and developmental disability where the rates are much higher.

It is estimated that 30% of children with epilepsy also have another type of disability. Some studies show that children with an intellectual disability and cerebral palsy, had a 35% chance of developing epilepsy, children with an intellectual disability alone had an 8% chance and children with a brain injury occurring after birth stood a 75% chance of developing epilepsy. Statistically, the risky of a child with a developmental disability experiencing an unprovoked seizure by age 5 is 4 times likely than the general population. It is estimated 1.8% of U.S. adults have epilepsy compared to 22% among people with intellectual disabilities.

People with intellectual disabilities tend to also have worse prognosis with adults having a higher rate of death including Sudden Unexplained Death In Epilepsy (SUDEP).

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a chronic disorder with recurrent unprovoked seizures. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (NINDS), epilepsys are a spectrum of brain disorders ranging from severe, life-threatening to ones that are more benign. The International League Against Epilepsy created a new definition of epilepsy. A person is considered to have epilepsy if they meet any of the following conditions:

1. At least two provoked (or reflex) seizures occurring greater than 24 hours apart.
2. One Unprovoked (or reflex) seizure and a probability of further seizures similar to the general recurrence risk (at least 60%) after two unprovoked seizures, occurring over the next 10 years.
3. Diagnosis of an epilepsy syndrome
4. A seizure is defined as an event and epilepsy is the disease involving recurrent unprovoked seizures.

Intellectual Disability

According to DSM-5, an intellectual disability is a disorder with onset during the developmental period that includes both intellectual and adaptive functioning deficits in conceptual social, and practical domains including deficits in intellectual functions such as reasoning, problem-solving, planning, abstract thinking, judgment, academic learning and learning from experiences. The severity levels range from mild to profound.
Although there is a high relationship between epilepsy and an intellectual disability, little research has been conducted on safe prescribing practices of antiepileptic drugs for people with intellectual disabilities. What is known about epilepsy and an intellectual disability is that more severe disabilities are typically caused by damage to the brain.

Why is it important to discuss?

Given the large number of people with an intellectual disability and epilepsy, treatment may be more complicated due to multiple impairments including people with a diagnosis of autism, intellectual disability and epilepsy. More research needs to occur which will help to reduce morbidity rates and help to develop accurate guidelines.