

Published August 04, 2008

Understanding 'brain shivers'

By VANESSA RAYMOND

Brain shivers? As odd as it sounds, "brain shivers" is a term used to describe sensations experienced when you discontinue regular antidepressant use. Known as "discontinuation syndrome" in the medical community, the experience of brain shivers is an under-recognized phenomenon.

So what is a brain shiver exactly? By all accounts, you'll know a brain shiver when you have one. It's not just run-of-the-mill dizziness, but an Electric Kool-Aid Acid kind of vertigo. Some people describe a brain shiver as similar to an electric shock, the sense of having hit one's funny bone, or like a strobe light pulsing inside of your head. One person I interviewed described it as feeling like "someone vomiting inside of your brain."

A brain shiver is often followed by brief but significant vertigo, nausea, disorientation, lightheadedness and/or ringing in the ears. In short, to say that brain shivers are an unpleasant experience would be putting it lightly.

Brain shivers result from discontinuing regular use of antidepressants and sometimes from missing just one dose. Certain antidepressants are more commonly associated with brain shivers: venlafaxine (Effexor), duloxetine (Cymbalta) and escitalopram (Lexapro), with Effexor leading the pack. Effexor and Cymbalta are serotonin and noradrenalin reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) and Lexapro is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), all of which affect the levels of serotonin (a neurotransmitter) in the brain. Brain shivers have also been reported following use of the drugs commonly known as Ecstasy and LSD (which are structurally similar to serotonin).

Certain motions seem to precipitate brain shivers. Brain shivers will often occur upon shifting your eyes or moving your head suddenly. The sensations tend to remain primarily in the head but can sometimes begin in the head and radiate downward and outward, even to your extremities.

Brain shivers are short episodes, usually lasting only several seconds at a time. Although the episodes themselves tend to be brief, the experience of having brain shivers intermittently can last anywhere from several days to several weeks. And brain shivers tend to increase in frequency as the withdrawal time from the antidepressant increases.

Although many doctors are not familiar with this side effect of ending antidepressant use, the clinical terminology used to describe brain shivers includes paresthesia (a fancy word for tingling), electric shock sensations and discontinuation symptoms (a bit of an understatement there, eh?). A doctor may be alerted to a patient who has discontinued his antidepressant regime without informing him by a patient's report of these symptoms.

Although there is no known danger or consequence of experiencing brain shivers, if you believe you suffer from brain shivers, you should let your physician know. You'll not only be helping yourself but you'll also help to educate the medical profession as to the existence of a withdrawal symptom that has been underreported.

(Vanessa Raymond is a Senior Editor for www.HowToDoThings.com. For related "How-To" articles, go to: www.howtodothings.com/health-and-fitness)

(For more info on this or explanations of how to do many other things, go to HowToDoThings.com.)