NEUROLOGY GROUP of BERGEN COUNTY

Essential Tremor

Essential tremor, also known as familial tremor, benign essential tremor or hereditary tremor is a rhythmic shaking movement caused by involuntary muscle contractions. This tremor, termed essential because it is not related to an underlying disorder, most frequently affects the hands and neck; it generally spares the muscles of the torso and lower limbs. Characteristically, essential tremor becomes more pronounced during activities such as writing or using a knife and fork, as distinguished from the tremor in Parkinson's disease, which often diminishes with movement. Essential tremor usually develops in middle age or later, and symptoms generally appear gradually. The most common of the so-called "shaking disorders", essential tremor is not a serious health risk. It responds well to treatment and in fact seems to be an indicator of an unusually long life.

What Causes Essential Tremor?

The cause of essential tremor is unknown. Genetic factors play a role in about half of all cases (familial tremor). Other causes of essential tremor include alcohol withdrawal, hyperthyroidism, pheochromocytoma (type of tumor of the sympathoadrenal system), excessive caffeine intake, use of certain medications, cigarette smoking and Wilson's disease.

Symptoms of Essential Tremor:

- Rhythmic shaking of the hands and fingers and, less frequently, the head, tongue, larynx, eyelids, or other parts of the body. The speed of the shaking movements may be rapid or moderate.
- Worsening of the tremor under the following conditions: with emotional or physical stress; when voluntarily moving the hands, head, and other muscles; when voluntarily trying to hold the head or hands still
- Cessation of the tremor when at rest
- Shaky handwriting, quivering voice, or head nodding
- Difficulty holding or using small objects (e.g., silverware or a pen)

Treatment of Essential Tremor:

- Beta-blocking drugs (commonly used to treat high blood pressure) such as Inderal (propranolol) and Mysoline (primidone) are generally the most effective medications for treating essential tremor.
- Other drugs, including anticonvulsants and tranquilizers may be used to treat muscle tremors that do not respond to the first line treatments.
- Avoid the consumption of caffeine and other stimulants, which may exacerbate the tremor.
- In severe cases that do not respond well to medications, controlled injections of botulinum toxin (which causes the muscle paralysis associated with botulism) into muscles of the forearm or neck may stop tremors.

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