Dear Alice,

Can Reye's syndrome cause chemical imbalances later in life? My mother had it as a teenager and has really bad mood swings and possible hypochondria and my aunt and I are trying to figure out if having Reye's syndrome could be the cause for some of it.

Answer

Dear Reader,

It is unlikely that your mother's hypochondria and mood swings are results of neurological damage caused by Reye's syndrome, but it's something worth exploring.

Although both adults and children are susceptible, Reye's syndrome is a rare but serious condition that typically appears after viral infections such as the flu or chickenpox. In some people (particularly those with metabolic disorders), treatment with aspirin during an active infection causes blood sugar levels to drop and ammonia levels to increase in the body. This may cause the liver to swell and develop fatty deposits. Brain swelling may also occur. As a result, symptoms generally include disorientation, motor skill dysfunction, seizures, and nausea. With immediate medical attention, Reye's syndrome is treatable and most people survive. However, some long-term neurological effects are possible. These include:

- Difficulties with attention, concentration, or memory
- Problems with motor skills and/or speech
- Issues with task completion

*Adapted from the National Reye's Syndrome Foundation* [2]

Hypochondria, or an irrational fear of undiagnosed illness, may result soon after treatment for Reye's syndrome, but it is unlikely a direct effect of the disease itself. Thought to be suffering from a type of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), hypochondriacs are often preoccupied with the belief that even the smallest of bodily abnormalities are signs of disease. Symptoms include:

- "Doctor shopping" (constantly switching health care providers)
- Obsessively researching health topics
• Constantly checking vital signs or doing self-examinations

Adapted from the Mayo Clinic [3]

Although the severity of hypochondria varies from person to person, it may cause emotional strain to the individual and their friends and family, which seems to be your case. Offering emotional support and potential resources for your mother to seek help may be the best option to address you and your aunt's concerns. If her experience with Reye's syndrome as a teenager was traumatic, it may have triggered her hypochondria, but the disease itself is unlikely the cause of any chemical imbalance you may observe.

A health care provider or mental health specialist could offer additional advice and guidance, so your mother may want to look into this. Whatever the cause, emotional distress and anxiety may affect more than just an individual's mental health, but there are certainly ways to address this.

Alice!
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