

MEDICINE

Migraine May Cause Death

► MIGRAINE may cause death under certain conditions. Dr. Erik Ask-Upmark, Royal University of Uppsala, Sweden, lists four conditions under which death may result.

1. Ophthalmoplegic migraine (affecting the eyes) may be due to an aneurysm of an artery that may rupture and be fatal.

2. Paroxysmal tachycardia (rapid heart action coming on and stopping) may be equivalent to migraine. It is apt to occur in families with migraine, so that an individual may have migraine at one time and the heart condition at another. Most cases of paroxysmal tachycardia can be handled, but if no adequate assistance is given during a severe attack, the circulation may be blocked as in pulmonary embolism.

3. There are rare instances of migraine connected with bradycardia (slow heart), and if in such a case ergotamine tartrate is injected into the veins, the heart may stop. Quick treatment with adrenaline may counteract the symptoms.

4. An increasingly common complication is in the kidneys, and can cause death by uremia (a toxic condition in which urine is in the blood).

Dr. Ask-Upmark says the kidney complication may be caused by long dosage with

phenacetin or by ergotamine tartrate for the relief of migraine headaches.

A fatal case was that of a 56-year-old physician, who because of migraine since childhood had been taking remedies containing mainly phenacetin. He died of uremia.

Seven others who escaped death but had advanced uremia were among those who had taken phenacetin. In addition, one woman had been taught by her physician to give herself injections of ergotamine tartrate.

Migraine may occur in from three to 30% of the population, Dr. Ask-Upmark reports in the British Medical Journal, Sept. 17, 1960, but usually is not prolonged or dangerous in a large percentage. It occurs more commonly in women than in men, so that if both sexes are considered, and "only severe cases embittering life for a number of years are included," three percent may be more accurate.

Animal experiments have failed to show proof that kidney trouble is caused by phenacetin. The doctor concludes that small doses of phenacetin used occasionally seem to be fairly safe, but that large doses taken over a number of years may bring about a form of nephritis that can cause death.

• Science News Letter, 78:221 October 1, 1960

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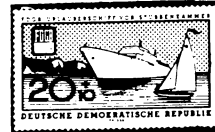
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