- Tumors

Brain tumours — myths versus facts

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THE diagnosis of a brain tumour is often met with dread. The term alone brings fear, mainly because of myths or misconceptions, limited awareness and the silent nature of many symptoms.



Although brain tumours are less common compared with other cancers, Malaysia has seen a noticeable increase in diagnosed cases, says Dr Ravindran. This, however, may not signal an actual rise in prevalence.

With greater awareness and wider availability of advanced imaging tools like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) scans, more cases are being detected early.

"People are more likely to investigate persistent symptoms today than they were 20 years ago."

In most cases, the exact cause remains unknown.

Dr Ravindran says most brain tumours are sporadic, but a small number are linked to genetic conditions like neurofibromatosis.

This disorder causes tumours to grow on nerves throughout the body, including the brain.

Exposure to ionising radiation is also a known risk factor.

While lifestyle factors like diet, exercise, or stress are important to wellbeing, they do not have a direct, proven link to brain tumour development.

A healthy lifestyle, however, can support better outcomes during recovery and treatment.

DISPELLING MISINFORMATION

Brain tumours are surrounded by misconceptions, many of which delay diagnosis or cause panic.

One common myth is that a headache means you have a brain tumour, says Dr Ravindran.

But headaches are a very nonspecific symptom. It's only worrisome if they are accompanied by visual disturbances, speech difficulties, weakness or numbness in the limbs.

Another popular misconception is that brain surgery leads to personality changes or loss of function.

Dr Ravindran says medical technology has dramatically changed the landscape.

"Surgical precision today is far greater, and outcomes are much improved. Patients are recovering faster and with fewer complications."

There's also no solid evidence that normal mobile phone use significantly increases the risk of brain tumours.

"This concern often comes up, but the data just doesn't support it at this time."

FINDING OUT EARLY

One of the most powerful tools in improving outcomes is early detection. But recognising the signs can be tricky. Brain tumours don't always present in the same way.

Red flags include persistent headaches, seizures, blurred vision, weakness in the arms or legs, speech difficulties and unexplained personality changes.

If any of these symptoms persist or worsen, it is best to seek medical advice.

Neurosurgery has come a long way over the years, with major advancements in how brain tumours are diagnosed and treated, says Dr Ravindran.

"We now use highresolution MRI and functional imaging to precisely locate and assess brain tumours."

Neuronavigation systems, intraoperative MRI, and intraoperative nerve monitoring also help guide surgeries in real time.

The rise of less invasive techniques such as awake craniotomy and keyhole surgery using advanced endoscopy is also beneficial.

These approaches have shortened hospital stays and reduced recovery time. In many cases, patients can return to normal life much sooner than expected.

LIFE AFTER SURGERY

However, surgery is only one part of the journey.

Post-operative care and long-term support play a critical role in recovery. "Recovery is a team effort. Patients may need physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy, depending on the affected brain areas." Follow-up imaging is also essential to monitor for recurrence. Just as important is the emotional aspect.

"Mental health support is vital. The diagnosis alone can be overwhelming, not just for patients, but their families too."

Counselling and psychological support are integral to a patient's quality of life.

Brain tumours may be rare, but the impact they have is profound. However, with early detection, cutting-edge technology and a holistic approach to care, patients are living longer, recovering better and reclaiming their lives. The most important thing is to listen to your body, stay informed, and never hesitate to seek medical advice. Early detection isn't just about survival, it's about preserving quality of life.