Functional Neurologic Symptom Disorder

What is functional neurologic symptom disorder?

It is a condition in which your child or teen develops physical symptoms, including weakness, abnormal movements, sensations, or speech, as a result of being emotionally overwhelmed. These symptoms may appear without a clear underlying cause and can be very challenging to manage. They may change over time and come and go.

What causes the disorder?

The symptoms are thought to be a result of mental or emotional crisis rather than neurologic disease or medical illness. The disorder is often seen in children who are undergoing significant stress, held to high expectations or exposed to emotional conflict.

How is it diagnosed?

There isn’t a standard test to check for this disorder. Because there is no medical test, understanding the cause can be a challenge. Your child’s doctor may do a neurologic exam and some other testing depending on the signs and symptoms your child has. This is to rule out any potential medical or neurological disease.

Your child may also have a psychiatric assessment. This helps us better understand your child’s emotions and behaviors, and how they may relate to their family, social, or school environment.

Emotions always play a role in physical well-being, and neurologic impairments can sometimes be a sign of your child or teen feeling overwhelmed, even if they aren’t aware of it. This can be frustrating for parents and caregivers who may not sense that their child struggles with stress or emotional impairments. Because of this, parents may be tempted to demand further testing and treatment, even though this may cause further risk (invasive tests, time away from home in hospital bed etc.).

How is the condition treated?

Fortunately functional neurologic symptoms are rarely dangerous and patients have a good chance for complete recovery if they are able to get the right support from their family and caregivers. The neurologic symptoms often recover when the child feels more emotionally supported. Counseling is recommended, and can also help families approach their child’s symptoms in a more effective way. While physical therapy or visits with other doctors can be helpful to monitor progress, the effective treatments tend to be behavioral and psychological.
What are helpful ways to support my child?

It is very important that you:

• Validate your child’s distress and provide hopeful messages of care and recovery.

• Do not convey that symptoms are “not real” or that your child is faking. This can create distrust and cause them to feel they need to demonstrate even further how disabling the symptoms can be.

• If you have doubts about the diagnosis or concerns about how your child’s case is being managed, express these directly to your child's healthcare providers when your child is not present. This will help your child see that there is a united effort at managing their care and focus on recovery.

• Support and help your child by having expectations for increased activity and normal behavioral demands for them.

• Do not over-accommodate in response to your child’s distress. This includes providing excessive soothing, attention, support for basic life activities (such as eating, bathing, communicating) and allowing your child to miss school or other responsibilities. If you accommodate their limitations, it only serves to strengthen them, and takes away from their ability to recover.

• Focus on the positive aspects of recovery. This will nurture your child’s motivation to be healthy instead of reinforcing their symptoms. Attention from you can be a powerful tool. It is much better to focus on positives and abilities rather than disabilities.

• When your child is in distress, do not respond immediately. Instead acknowledge their distress in a validating way while putting some responsibility on them for ideas that could help. If your child can be empowered to use their own resources to manage the distress associated with the symptoms, they will feel more capable of achieving independence. This can be fostered by having them learn specific skills from a therapist to tolerate their distress, such as using relaxation techniques, mindfulness practice, and learning to challenge negative thoughts.

• Help map out a path to recovery in collaborative way with your child and their healthcare providers. They should know that they have a team to support their recovery and emotional wellbeing.

• Set concrete goals and expectations for your child that are aligned with their own goals (get out of the hospital; get back to school, back on soccer team, etc.).

What if our family and child feel discouraged?

There will be times when you and your child may feel discouraged. It can be helpful to:

• Reflect any past improvements with your child and, reassure them that they are safely progressing down the path to recovery.
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To Learn More
• Psychiatry & Behavioral Medicine
  206-987-2164
• Ask your child’s healthcare provider

• Provide your child emotional support when frustrations arise. Ask for support for yourself and other family members when you are feeling frustrated or discouraged.
• Remind your child that you are on the same team and that recovery may be a long process with many ups and downs. When you work together and remind them of their recovery goals, you help your child’s motivation, even if they don’t feel that way in the moment.

Free Interpreter Services
• In the hospital, ask your child’s nurse.
• From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Seattle Children’s offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children’s will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201.

This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children’s. However, your child’s needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child’s healthcare provider.

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