

# It's a pain that drives you to suicide

## **Trigeminal Neuralgia is the newest bane for city's neurosurgeons, with cases rising four-fold in 2 years**

In India it burst into public consciousness in 2011, when Salman Khan was diagnosed with the ailment and underwent a surgery in the US. But Trigeminal Neuralgia (TN), also called "the suicide disease", which eluded diagnosis and treatment until just two years ago, is now getting the attention it needs and cases reported have gone up four-fold, say city-based neurosurgeons working to fight the nerve disorder.

"Three years ago I visited some of the big daddies of the city's medical fraternity, which included leading surgeons but none could understand my problem. Even neurologists tried to put down my pain as a psychosomatic issue. But I could tell that the excruciating pain that I was experiencing in my face could not have been a figment of my imagination," recalled Poonam Kirloskar, a housewife, who was finally diagnosed with TN a year ago by a consultant neurologist at Jehangir Hospital. He directed her to Dr Jaydev Panchawagh, a neurosurgeon and one of the founders of Synapse Brain and Spine Foundation, for the corrective surgery, which was performed at Deenanath Mangeshkar Hospital, where he is a consultant.

Life was hell for Kirloskar until this happened. "I was on heavy medication that kept me groggy. I could not drive or go out by myself. My interpersonal relationships suffered and my children bore the brunt of my constant irritability," she told Mirror. She is not the only one who was kept in prolonged agony by this ignorance about the syndrome even among doctors. In fact, Shankar Chame (name changed on request), a labourer, had already turned suicidal before his problem could be pinpointed. Medication had him suffering dizzy spells, making it difficult for him to work. Eating became too painful an exercise. Though originally a teetotaler, he took to drinking so he could will himself to eat his food. But he completely lost it when the acute pain turned chronic.

Anupama Sarode (again changed), a housewife, was reduced to sending SMSes to her husband to converse with him, as talking and eating became harrowing. A slight touch on her face would send the shock waves shooting from her cheeks to her forehead.

TN occurs when the blood vessel adjacent to the trigeminal nerve starts exerting pressure on it. Inflicting severe facial pain, the problem can make eating, brushing teeth and even air brushing the skin of the face an excruciating experience.

"Being part of the normal structure of the brain, rather than a distinguishable growth, the problem may or may not be thrown up in MRI scans and cannot be deciphered easily. This has made diagnosis a little elusive," informed Dr Panchawagh. While a person can be hit by TN anytime between the age of three and 90, if their blood vessel is positioned in greater proximity to the nerve, its incidence is seen to be greater post-40, where an elongation of the blood vessel occurs due to age.

Given the past ignorance about the disease, the doctors treating it are not convinced that the rise in the number of patients coming to them marks a rise in incidence of the ailment. "There is a better awareness about the ailment among general practitioners and neurologists today," noted Dr Ranjit Deshmukh, a neurosurgeon with Sahyadri Hospital.

"In 2011 I used to see about 10 such cases a week. This has gone up to 15 a week. I put it down to awareness after the publicity Salman Khan's experience got," said Dr Rahul Chakor, neurologist and epileptologist associated with Wockhardt Hospital, Saifee Hospital and Prince Aly Khan Hospital in Mumbai. In Pune, Dr Panchawagh insists the rise in case being reported is far more dramatic. "I have seen a four times rise in patients. It is not so much about incidence as that of reduced misdiagnosis and better awareness," he said.

"The disease can be treated with either medicines or procedures such as Radio Frequency Lesioning (RFL) or by injecting glycol or alcohol – all for numbing the nerve. But, these methods are considered destructive. The other option is Micro Vascular Decompression (MVD) which separates the blood vessel from the trigeminal nerve to take away the pressure which is the genesis of the problem. This surgery is preferred particularly for otherwise healthy and young patients," Dr Deshmukh told Mirror.

