

Seizure risk tied to PTSD

BY DELTHIA RICKS

delthia.ricks@newsday.com

Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder are at risk of developing psychologically induced seizures, and being misdiagnosed because of them, a new study has found.

The condition, called psychogenic non-epileptic seizures, is easily confused with epilepsy, medical researchers said yesterday, because it has all the characteristics of that condition — except the underlying electrical storm of brain activity.

Seizures brought on by PTSD, the study found, are triggered by a combination of psychological factors, such as stress, depression and anxiety.

“This phenomenon is very familiar to us who are seeing patients [in the civilian population],” said Dr. Cynthia Harden, chief of encephalography and epilepsy at the North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, who wasn’t associated with the study.

The difference with veterans,

said the study’s lead investigator, Dr. Martin Salinsky of Oregon Health & Science University, is the assumption that they experienced traumatic head injuries — often a cause of epilepsy.

He and a research team emphasized that not only are veterans more likely to be misdiagnosed, they can also be prescribed epilepsy medications that do not help and can have dangerous side effects. Salinsky’s analysis is in this week’s journal *Neurology*.

The investigators reviewed the medical records of 203 veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and other conflicts and 726 civilians who were admitted to an epilepsy monitoring center over a 10-year period.

Fifty veterans were diagnosed with psychogenic seizures, and then matched them with 50 civilians with the same diagnosis.

But it took up to five years for veterans to be diagnosed with PTSD-induced seizures, compared with only a year for civilians. Doctors had earlier assumed traumatic brain injury

in 60 percent of the veterans.

Dr. Steven Pacia, director of the epilepsy center at Lenox Hill Hospital in Manhattan, said the study “raises important concerns about access to specialty care for our veterans.”

Harden noted that psychogenic seizures are difficult to diagnose. “We hospitalize the patient and do video monitoring studies to capture the spell.”

Analyzing the seizure on video and studying patients’ brain wave activity on an EEG allows doctors to distinguish one type of seizure from the other, she said.

The U.S. Veterans Affairs Department estimates 11 percent of Afghanistan veterans and 20 percent of Iraq vets have PTSD. It is not known how many veterans have PTSD-induced seizures.

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can occur after exposure to a traumatic event. The National Center for PTSD, a division of the VA, lists wars, terror attacks, physical or sexual abuse, serious accidents and natural disasters as some of the leading causes.

