



# **'Benign' Does Not Mean 'Harmless'** **- Exploding the Myth Behind** **'Benign' Brain Tumors**

*By Emma Flixton for It's Just Benign, a non-profit organization serving benign brain tumor survivors.*

The phrase 'brain tumor' brings panic and despair, the word 'benign' intense relief. So great is this sense of relief, in fact, that many people appear to equate the 'benign' status of a brain tumor with a declaration that the condition is nothing to worry about – or even with a sort of cure. The implication of the word 'benign' in many people's view is that they no longer have to worry about and support the sufferer. This view fails to take into account that the symptoms which drove the sufferer to the doctor in the first place are usually still present, despite the tumor's 'benign' status, and often still causing significant problems. Indeed, once a tumor is classified as benign, friends and family members who have previously supported the sufferer through their affliction may even come to think of the patient as a malingerer, making a mountain out of a molehill, and not in need of support. The prevailing 'Oh, but it's benign! You're fine!' attitude can be intensely frustrating for people who have to live with these supposedly 'innocent' brain tumors. Just because such tumors may not be immediately life-threatening (although some of them do, in fact, present a significant threat to life) does not mean that they are not life-affecting.

## **The Brain Is Important**

It goes without saying that the brain is an extremely important part of the body. It is a mass of vital tissues connected through a complex network of chemicals, hormones, nerves, synapses and electrical impulses which ricochet throughout the entire body. We do not yet fully understand the brain or how it works – possibly we never will - but we do understand its importance. The brain controls the functions of the body: speech, movement, breathing, even heartbeat. Within the brain we keep our memories, and the assortment of knowledge, memory, emotion and so on which make up what we think of as our 'selves'. If personality – or 'soul', if you prefer – has a seat within the body, that seat is undoubtedly the brain. It should therefore be obvious that a cluster of rogue cells intruding upon this vital organ is a cause for concern, no matter how malignant or

otherwise they may be. The old adage that human beings use only 10% of their brains has been [thoroughly disproven](#). Every part of the brain is vital, so a tumor in any portion of it is bound to have an impact upon the functioning of one's life. This fact does not alter simply because the tumor is benign. Though it may not be growing as fast as a malignant tumor, or eating away at healthy matter in the same horrific manner, it is nonetheless still there, and still causing problems for the sufferer.

### **A Wide Variety Of Symptoms**

The symptoms of a benign brain tumor seem almost limitless, depending largely upon factors like the location and size of the tumor. Sufferers commonly experience crippling headaches due to the pressure the tumor exerts upon the brain. Seizures are another common symptom. Nobody would blithely state that an epileptic was making too much of their condition and should be thankful that it is not worse. However, this is precisely what many benign brain tumor sufferers who have been effectively rendered epileptic by their tumor are told when they seek emotional support. Given the nature of the brain, [different tumor locations cause different symptoms](#). A tumor in the occipital lobe may cause problems with vision. A tumor in the parietal lobe can have effects similar to that of a stroke – numbness in one side of the body, difficulty speaking and coordinating oneself, and so forth. A tumor in the cerebellum can cause sudden, unexpected vomiting, a stiff neck, difficulties with speech and movement, and a flicking of the eyes. A tumor in the brain stem can manifest through problems in swallowing, unsteadiness, and a droopy face. The list goes on and on, and the symptoms are by no means limited to those listed above. Some with ostensibly 'benign' tumors are killed by them – a tumor pressing on the brainstem (an area of the brain on which many doctors will not operate) can fatally interfere with breathing. Many with such tumors, if they survive, may spend their lives hooked up to life-support systems. Some have tumors which render them incapable of swallowing, and must be fed through an IV tube. Daily medication for seizures, depression, pain and so on are the order of the day for those with benign tumors, and many find their lives disrupted even more by the fact that they may be unable to drive or, indeed, work due to double vision, seizures, loss of hearing, and a whole plethora of other disabling conditions entirely due to the tumor. Furthermore, such tumors frequently grow back – so even if one undergoes complex and dangerous neurosurgery to have it removed, chances are that even this will not eliminate the problem.

### **Changes In Personality**

Perhaps most worrying of all for some are the [personality changes which sometimes accompany brain tumors](#). Given the brain's role in regulating hormone release, impulse control, and other things which affect actions and emotions it is perhaps not surprising that an obstruction like a tumor should result in some personality change. However, this is often very distressing for the sufferer, who frequently finds themselves unable to connect with their loved ones in the same manner as before. Such changes come with a

host of attendant problems, such as depression due to emotional imbalance (or simply due to the agony of feeling that one has lost one's 'self'), or loss of inhibition. This latter can lead to all sorts of problematic avenues – such as problems with the law due to poor impulse control, the disruption of family relationships, or even a downward spiral into drugs or alcoholism which greatly increases the amount of [help, support, and treatment](#) needed.

### **Recognition And Respect**

It is clear, therefore, that 'benign' does not necessarily mean 'harmless'. While benign tumors may not necessarily be directly life-threatening, they can still massively impact the lives of those who suffer from them. It is time to end the notion that a benign tumor is not a problem at all. People afflicted with benign tumors suffer from very real problems. While this argument is by no means intended to denigrate the undoubted suffering of those poor souls with malignant brain tumors, it is perhaps time to also afford those whose tumors are benign a little more recognition and respect for their struggles.