

Few nine-year-olds know as much about strokes as Valerie Erickson's daughter, Kennedy. Diagnosed with a rare and potentially fatal brain disorder, Valerie could only watch helplessly as her little girl suffered a series of mini-strokes that left her too weak to stand. But Kennedy's only hope—a groundbreaking new procedure—could also kill her . . .



"Kennedy got the best birthday gift ever—life!" says Valerie.

and separated the artery from the surrounding tissue, then drilled a tiny opening in the skull beneath it. Through this hole, he rerouted the artery to the brain. Then, a smaller hole was made to allow new blood vessels to form. Five hours after the surgery began, Dr. Mehta appeared in the waiting room. "It was a success!" he announced.

Six weeks later, on her eighth birthday, Kennedy was back in the hospital for her second surgery. And this time, she knew just how difficult an ordeal she faced. "Mom-

Kennedy's double miracle

Mommy, can I have more chocolate pudding, please?" Valerie Erickson's seven-year-old daughter, Kennedy, pleaded.

"I'll have to check with the nurse, honey," the 40-year-old Port Saskatchewan, Alberta, Canada, single mom replied, trying to keep her composure.

The nurses had promised Kennedy she could eat all her favorite snacks

also loved lip gloss and teddy bears.

Then one day, Valerie got a call from Kennedy's teacher. "Your daughter fainted in class this morning," she said.

The teacher explained that by the time an ambulance had arrived, Kennedy had regained consciousness, "But she didn't know who she was."

What's wrong with my little girl? Valerie panicked as she raced to the ER to find Kennedy already sitting up. "Hi, Mommy!" Kennedy piped up, her memory returned.

"Is she okay?" Valerie asked the doctors.

"We couldn't find anything wrong," they assured her.

On the ride home, Kennedy seemed to be her old self again. But just a few weeks later . . . "Mommy, my legs feel all wobbly!" Kennedy complained. Maybe they're growing pains, Valerie told herself.

But the wobbliness never went away. Sometimes her legs felt so weak, she'd have to sit down suddenly to keep from falling. Kennedy's doctor was stumped. Tests had ruled out epilepsy and seizures, so . . . "All I can tell you is what it isn't," he told Valerie.

"Then I want more tests done!" she replied.

"We'll schedule an MRI," the doctor said. Valerie's heart squeezed with fear when the doctor called with the results.

"We found a mass on Kennedy's brain," he said, and referred her to Vivek Mehta, M.D., a pediatric neurosurgeon at Stollery Children's Hospital.

"Your daughter has a rare type of aneurysm called moyamoya," Dr. Mehta said. His eyes were grave as he pulled Valerie aside. The blood supply to Kennedy's brain was slowly being depleted, he told her. This caused a series of mini-strokes—explaining the sudden weakness in her legs.

Valerie felt her world turn upside down. "Is there a cure?" she gasped.

Dr. Mehta shook his head. "No," he said. "The only real hope for Kennedy is brain surgery."

Surgeons would isolate an artery that supplies blood to the scalp, then reconnect it to the brain to increase blood flow.

But the groundbreaking procedure—called pial synangiosis—had never been performed in western Canada. And it was risky: Kennedy could suffer a brain hemorrhage or

major stroke during surgery, resulting in paralysis . . . or even death.

Even if Kennedy survived, "there's no guarantee the surgery will work," Dr. Mehta cautioned.

But without it, eventually, the blood supply to Kennedy's brain would be completely cut off!

"We'll take the chance," Valerie swallowed hard.

The plan was to operate on the right side of Kennedy's brain first, and wait six weeks to perform a second surgery on the left side. And now, on the night before her first surgery, Kennedy was finishing up her pudding . . . and Valerie was praying. Please, God, watch over my baby! she begged.

"Just dream about riding horses with Auntie Holly and Uncle Dave," Valerie whispered as Kennedy was wheeled into the OR.

Dr. Mehta made an incision in Kennedy's scalp

my, we don't have to go through this," she whimpered. "You could just take me home."

"I know it's scary, but when it's over, we'll have the best birthday party ever!" Valerie promised.

"Okay, Mommy," Kennedy grinned. And six hours later . . .

Soon she was blowing out eight candles!

"She's going to be fine!" Dr. Mehta announced. A week later, Kennedy was back home blowing out the candles on her cake!

Today, nearly two years after the surgery, the mini-seizures are gone and Kennedy is a healthy, active nine-year-old who's back to riding her bike and running with Midnite. "Dr. Mehta is my hero," says Kennedy. "He saved my life!"

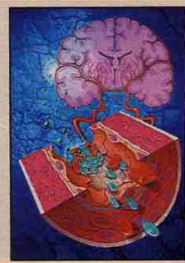
—Elizabeth Holzemer

Reduce your risk of stroke

You can reduce your risk by not smoking, limiting alcohol and keeping blood pressure and cholesterol at healthy levels, say experts at the American Stroke Association. Research suggests it also helps to:

- Eat fish 2-4 times a week.
- Eat foods rich in vitamin C, like tomatoes, oranges and pineapples.

For more information, log on to www.strokeassociation.org.



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