



Epilepsy surgery can stop seizures

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HOUSTON - It's an amazing medical breakthrough that has epilepsy patients around the world looking at Houston, where doctors are performing a procedure that has patients jumping at the chance to have surgeons operate on their brains. It's a surgery that can stop debilitating seizures.

Kaitlyn Swonke was 17 years old when she collapsed on the softball field and suffered a seizure.

"That's the beginning of a nightmare," her mother, Kelly Swonke, said.

Her mother got the call to meet Kaitlyn at the hospital. The next two years of their lives were full of pain and unpredictable seizures.

"I was dropping every 45 minutes and the medicine wasn't working correctly," Kaitlyn said.

"Violent seizures. That's not living. Planting your face into every piece of furniture," Kelly Swonke said.

They found Dr. Nitin Tandon, director of the epilepsy surgery program at Memorial Hermann Mischer Neuroscience Institute at the Texas Medical Center and McGovern Medical School at UTHealth, who uses the Rosa robot in surgeries to curb epilepsy symptoms.

"Of every three patients that we operate on, we make it to seizure-free or cured," Tandon said "This is the first step of the two-step process. This step allows them to identify, and the second step allows us to identify where to remove the tissue that is causing the seizure."

In an operation similar to Kaitlyn's, doctors are putting electrodes into a man's brain to map the seizures.

"He will go off to the epilepsy unit after these electrodes are in. We'll record from these brain areas making the seizures and then based on that we will be able to tell him and his family what his odds of success from epilepsy surgery are," Tandon said.

Kaitlyn hit a lot of challenges on her way to success. She even had to redo one of the steps. Then post-surgery, she had some memory and dexterity problems.

But she worked through it and plays the guitar to prove how far she's come.

"Not one (seizure) for 11 months," she said.

And she has plans for how far she will go without seizures.

"About to start college. Which, by the way, I got a job," she said. "When you're restricted from a lot of things like work, driving, school, it's pretty exciting to be able to do those things again."

Tandon does not recommend the procedure for everyone. He said patients who have seizures that come from multiple parts of the brain or from too deep inside the brain are not good candidates.

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