



Dr Sally Hope talks to you

Woman²woman

She's a GP and a mum of two, and she's waiting to help you with your medical problems...

A second opinion on 'Water on the brain'

A few years ago I had a routine operation to remove varicose veins. I'd always been very healthy, so a short stay in hospital didn't worry me. I have spina bifida occulta – a small, harmless hole in my back that's never given me any trouble before.

A few months after the op, my legs started to feel very weak. Then I began to suffer bladder problems. I constantly needed the loo and couldn't control myself.

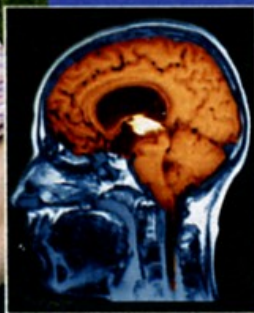
Doctors put my symptoms down to stress and my age, and I was advised to do pelvic-floor exercises for my bladder problems. They said my weak legs were due to the varicose-vein surgery, and suggested physio.

At the end of May 2001 I went on holiday to Germany with my husband Bob. But by then everything was a huge struggle – I could barely walk. Back home, I looked at our photos and didn't recognise a thing. It was as if I was developing signs of dementia.

Then, on another break, I became very ill. I woke up one day and said to Bob, "I don't know why, but I really need to see a doctor now." Soon after, I was vomiting and had a terrible



Wendy Simmons, 57, from Skegness, Lincs, with her granddaughter. Below: an MRI scan shows a brain with NPH



I lost control of my mind and body

headache. I was admitted to hospital, where I was diagnosed with normal-pressure hydrocephalus (NPH) – sometimes known as 'water on the brain'. It's an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the brain cavities and had caused all my symptoms. But doctors struggled to spot it as most sufferers are in their 60s or 70s.

Surgeons decided to operate. I was given a

shunt (a narrow tube) to drain the fluid. Just hours after waking up I couldn't believe the difference. Suddenly, I was back to my old self. Six months after the surgery I was back to normal and working again.

Dr Hope, why do some people suffer this disorder?

Dr Hope says I'm so glad you recovered well, Wendy. NPH is rare but, sadly, many cases are misdiagnosed

as dementia and therefore not treated. As your story shows, it's so important not to miss it.

The classic signs are poor short-term memory and mental slowing (dementia), incontinence and difficulty in walking – as you had. The walking problems are described as the 'glued-to-the-floor' sign, experienced when you stand up and first attempt to walk.

NPH is sometimes linked with previous head injury or bleeding into the brain, and also with certain congenital abnormalities, so your spina bifida was the probable cause.

The screening test is a CT scan. NPH is one of the few treatable causes of dementia, along with an underactive thyroid, and low vitamin B12.

People with serious short-term memory loss should have full referral and investigations. With NPH, shunting may produce a 'useful' improvement in around 70 per cent of people, with a full recovery in a third.

● ASBAH (Association for Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus) tel: 01733 555988. Visit www.asbah.org