

Let's paint the town purple for epilepsy

NGO hopes to change perceptions of an illness that afflicts up to 70,000

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Let's paint the town purple – that will be the colour of everything if epilepsy awareness advocates have their way this month.

People can expect to see fruit, vegetables, T-shirts and money in this colour, which is an extension of the global Purple Day push on March 26.

"People still don't really know much about epilepsy," said Shymala Padmasola, a spokeswoman for NGO Enlighten. "It was only in June 2010 when they changed the Chinese name from, *deen gan tsing*, to *mo gan tsing*. *Deen* means crazy, and no one wants to say they have a disease that makes them sound crazy."

Padmasola and Enlighten hope the month-long campaign involving schools and businesses will get people asking questions about the neurological disease which affects 50 million worldwide, according to the World Health Organisation.

"We chose purple as the colour for epilepsy because it's synonymous with solitude, which is what many people with epilepsy feel. We want to let people know what's happening."

Epilepsy is caused when the brain releases excessive electrical signals disturbing normal brain activity and leading to seizures. Seizures can start between the ages of five and 20.

In Hong Kong, there are an 40,000 to 70,000 epileptics based on studies by Queen Mary Hospital, and global rates of epilepsy.

"There are a lot of misconceptions about the disease. For instance, I've been told to shove a spoon into the mouth of someone having a seizure and that's the worst thing you can do – it'll break their teeth," said Padmasola. The right thing to do would be to rest their head on something soft until the episode passes. There is no need to call an ambulance.

"It's scary for people who aren't used to it, but if an ambulance was called every time someone had a seizure, it would swamp the system unnecessarily." Seizures can also be as mild as rapid blinking.