



Epilepsy

What is epilepsy?

Your brain uses electrical activity to send messages to the rest of your body.

Epilepsy is a condition that affects this electrical activity. It causes something called epileptic seizures.

About 1 in 200 children and young people in UK have epilepsy.

What is a seizure?

An epileptic seizure is when the amount of electrical activity in your brain suddenly increases. This affects how your body behaves.

There are lots of different types of seizure. They affect different people in different ways.

What causes epilepsy?

Epilepsy can be caused by:

- **changes or damage to your brain**
This could be because of an injury or illness, or it could have been there since birth.
- **changes in your genes**
Genes are the instructions for how to make a person. Sometimes a changed gene is passed down from a parent. Sometimes the change just happens.

Sometimes, we don't know why someone has epilepsy.

What are the different types of seizure?

Some seizures affect all of your brain. Others affect only part of it.

Seizures that affect the whole of your brain are called generalised seizures.

Seizures that affect only part of your brain are called focal seizures.

What are focal seizures?

Focal seizures start in 1 area of the brain.

They can affect the movement of your muscles, or they can affect the way you feel or think.

Focal motor seizures

These seizures affect your muscles.

You may make repeated or jerking movements, including:

- jerking of 1 side of your body or 1 arm or leg
- movement in 1 eye or on 1 side of your head
- your body turning to 1 side
- plucking at your clothes
- your eyelids fluttering

Focal non-motor seizures

These seizures do not affect your muscles. Instead, you may feel:

- like you have already lived the moment (déjà vu)
- an unusual smell or taste
- a sudden intense feeling of fear or joy
- a feeling of numbness or tingling (pins and needles)
- sick (nausea)
- a strange, rising sensation in your tummy, as if you are nervous or have butterflies
- changes to your heart rate
- changes to the colour of your skin (looking pale or flushed. This may be harder to see on black or brown skin)

During a focal seizure, you may be aware of what is happening around you. This is called a focal aware seizure.

Or you may be less aware of what is happening around you. This is a focal impaired awareness seizure. You may be able to hear people, but you may not fully understand what they are saying. You may not be able to react as you usually would.

What are generalised seizures?

This is when both sides of the brain are affected by the seizure from the start. You usually lose consciousness with these seizures. This means your brain switches off for a while.

There are different types of generalised seizures.

Absence seizures

During an absence seizure, you stop what you are doing for a few seconds. You look like you are daydreaming.

Your eyelids may flutter. Your arms and legs may make small jerking movements

Your eyes are open, but you are not aware of what is happening around you.

You will usually feel OK when it has finished. You may know something happened to you, but you may not realise you had a seizure.

Absence seizures are one of the most common seizures in children.

Atonic seizures

This is where your muscles become limp. This happens very quickly. You may fall to the ground or slump over.

Unless you hurt yourself when you fall, you should feel OK quite soon afterwards.

Myoclonic seizures

These seizures are when a muscle jerks or moves without you controlling it. They can affect some or all of the body.

They usually last a second, but you may have a few close together.

You should feel OK afterwards.

Tonic seizures

These seizures are when your muscles get stiff. You may fall to the floor. You may have trouble breathing.

After a tonic seizure, your muscles will relax. You will start breathing normally again.

You might feel very tired or confused afterwards.

Tonic-clonic seizures

This is the type of seizure people often think of when they think about epilepsy.

These seizures have 2 stages. First your whole body goes stiff, and then it jerks.

You lose consciousness, so you won't be aware of what's happening. You may make a sound like you are crying out. You may dribble or have some froth from your mouth.

Tonic-clonic seizures usually last a few minutes.

Afterwards, you may feel tired, sore or unwell. For some people, this lasts a few days.

What makes seizures happen?

Something that causes a seizure is called a trigger. Not everyone with epilepsy has the same triggers.

Here are some things that can make seizures more likely:

- not taking your antiseizure medicine properly
- changing to a different brand of antiseizure medicine
- being tired
- not having enough sleep, or changes to your sleep pattern
- being ill
- worry or stress
- having trouble pooing (constipation)
- periods (menstruation)
- drinking too much alcohol
- misusing drugs or other substances
- photosensitivity

Photosensitivity is when seizures are set off by:

- flashing lights
- certain patterns
- the movement of objects like a ceiling fan or an escalator
- computer screens
- sunlight

Photosensitivity affects about 3 in 100 people who have epilepsy.

Do I need to take medicine for my epilepsy?

Most people with epilepsy take medicine. This is to try to stop them having seizures.

7 or 8 people in every 10 with epilepsy will stop having seizures if they take medicine.

Antiseizure medicines are usually taken 1 to 3 times a day. We will explain how many times a day to take yours and when.

You can find out more about your epilepsy medicine by putting its name into the search box on this website: www.medicinesforchildren.org.uk

How can I stay safe?

People with epilepsy are at risk of injuries or accidents during seizures. Some of the riskiest situations involve:

- heat
- heights
- traffic
- water

We can give you advice about staying safe during seizures.

This website also has more information: www.epilepsy.org.uk/living/safety

What should people around me do if I have a seizure?

It can be scary if you see someone having a seizure, especially a tonic-clonic seizure. Give this information to your family and friends so that they know what to do.

If someone is having a tonic-clonic seizure:

Try to stay calm.



Look at the time at the start and the end of the seizure so you know how long it has lasted.

Move hard objects away from them so they do not hurt themselves.



If they are on the floor, put something soft under their head. You could use a cushion or a folded blanket or jumper.

At the end of the seizure, roll them on to their side. If you know how to do the recovery position, you can do this.



If someone has a seizure in water, keep their head above the water until the seizure has finished.

Do not put anything in their mouth during a seizure. This could harm them, or they could bite you.



If a seizure lasts 5 minutes, ring 999 for an ambulance.

You can find out more about what to do if someone has a seizure here:

www.epilepsy.org.uk/info/first-aid

Do I need medicine during a seizure?

Some people have a special emergency medicine. This can go into the side of their mouth during a seizure. It can help stop the seizure.

Your doctor or epilepsy nurse will decide if you need this medicine. They will show you how to use it.

More information

These websites have lots of information about epilepsy and how you can get more support:

Epilepsy Action www.epilepsy.org.uk

Young Epilepsy www.youngepilepsy.org.uk

If you or someone you care for would like easy-read information, you can find it on these websites:

Epilepsy Action <https://www.epilepsy.org.uk/living/epilepsy-and-learning-disabilities>

Easy Health <https://www.easyhealth.org.uk/pages/14-epilepsy>

Epilepsy Scotland <https://www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk/easy-read-information-about-epilepsy/>