

Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a medical condition that results in repeated seizures. There are several different types of epilepsy, causing different types of seizures. Medicines can help prevent epileptic seizures.

A seizure (or 'fit') is a sudden, short burst of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. This causes changes in thoughts, feelings, behavior or consciousness that usually last from a few seconds to a few minutes. Not everyone who experiences a seizure has epilepsy. A person with epilepsy has repeated seizures.

Causes of epilepsy

Causes of epilepsy include brain damage (e.g., stroke), brain infections, brain tumors, and inherited genes. Sometimes no cause for a person's seizures can be found.

Triggers for seizures

Certain things can set off (trigger) a seizure including:

- Lack of sleep
- Stress
- Menstrual periods
- Missing meals
- Flickering lights
- Illness, fever
- Head injury
- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- Some medicines
- Illegal drugs (e.g., marijuana)
- Epilepsy medicine changes.

Types of seizures

There are two main types of epileptic seizures:

Partial seizures

Partial seizures affect only one part of the brain. Symptoms depend on which part is affected.

- **Simple partial seizure** – You may feel, hear, see, smell, or taste odd sensations, or have muscle jerks, but you remain conscious and aware of what is happening.
- **Complex partial seizure (temporal lobe epilepsy)** – Your consciousness is altered and you may suddenly become vague, confused or appear to be in a trance. You may also behave strangely (e.g., smack your lips repeatedly). After the seizure you may be confused and drowsy, and have no memory of the seizure.

Generalized seizures

Generalized seizures affect all or most of the brain. They include:

- **Absence seizures (petit mal)** – You lose consciousness and suddenly 'go blank' or stare for a few seconds. Your eyes may roll upwards or flicker and your face may twitch. These seizures commonly begin in childhood and can be mistaken for daydreaming. Most people recover immediately, with no memory of the seizure.
- **Tonic-clonic seizures (grand mal)** – Also called convulsions. Suddenly your whole body goes stiff (tonic phase) and

you lose consciousness. If standing, you will fall. Then your body shakes or jerks due to repeated muscle contractions (clonic phase). You may groan, breathe noisily, bite your tongue and dribble. Your eyes may roll back and you may lose bladder and/or bowel control. Afterwards you may be tired, confused, sore and have a headache.

Medicines

Medicines cannot cure epilepsy, but can help prevent seizures. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice about epilepsy medicines (anticonvulsants).

- Different types of epilepsy may need different epilepsy medicines.
- Epilepsy medicines must be taken exactly as prescribed by your doctor.
- Changing to a different brand of medicine may trigger seizures.
- Missing doses or suddenly stopping medicines may trigger seizures.
- Epilepsy medicines can cause side effects.
- Alcohol and some medicines can change the effects of epilepsy medicines.
- Some epilepsy medicines can change the effects of other medicines (e.g., the effect of oral contraceptives is reduced by some epilepsy medicines).
- Illness, diarrhoea and vomiting may change the effects of epilepsy medicines.
- Some people who have been free of seizures for several years are able to stop their epilepsy medicines.

Self care

Strategies to help manage epilepsy include:

- Learn about the type of epilepsy you have and try to avoid things that trigger your seizures
- Keep a record of your seizures and triggers
- Get enough sleep
- Use relaxation techniques to manage stress
- Limit alcohol
- Limit caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Tell your doctor if you are planning a pregnancy. Your medicines may need changing or you may need a folic acid supplement
- Wear a bracelet or necklace stating your name, address and medical condition
- Make your home and workplace safe for seizures (e.g., leave bathroom door unlocked)
- Have showers instead of baths
- Watch television or use a computer in good lighting and take regular breaks
- Always swim with other people, not by yourself. Wear a life jacket for water sports
- Wear a helmet when doing activities with a risk of head injury
- Join an epilepsy association for support and information.

Important

- Consult a doctor if you experience a seizure for the first time, you continue to have seizures or your seizures change.
- Do not stop epilepsy medicines suddenly.
- Do not change brands of epilepsy medicines unless your doctor agrees. Check with your doctor first.
- The risk of seizures can make some activities dangerous (e.g., driving a car, operating machinery). Australia has certain laws about driving with epilepsy.

First aid for tonic-clonic seizures

1. Stay with and protect a person having a seizure:

- Protect him/her from injury (e.g., clear area, put something soft under head)
- Note time and length of seizure
- Do not limit his/her movement
- Do not put anything in his/her mouth.

2. Manage injuries:

- Place on his/her side as soon as possible, with head turned to keep airway clear
- Manage injuries resulting from seizure
- Do not disturb if he/she falls asleep
- Continue to check airway, breathing, circulation.

3. Phone 000 for an ambulance if:

- Seizure continues for more than five minutes
- Another seizure quickly follows
- Person is not conscious within 5 minutes of seizure stopping
- Person is injured or cannot breathe properly
- Seizure occurs in water
- Person is pregnant or has diabetes
- You believe it is the person's first seizure.

For more information

MedicAlert

Phone: 1800 88 22 22
www.medicalert.org.au

Epilepsy Australia – National Helpline

Phone: 1300 852 853
Website: www.epilepsyaustralia.net

Epilepsy Action Australia

Phone: 1300 37 45 37
Website: www.epilepsy.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222
Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on
CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)
Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26
from anywhere in Australia.

*Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.*

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