

# What is epilepsy?

## About epilepsy

In the UK, there are over 600,000 people with epilepsy.

If you have epilepsy, it means you have had more than one epileptic seizure and could have more in the future.

Electrical activity is happening in our brain all the time. A seizure happens when there is a sudden burst of intense electrical activity. This is often referred to as epileptic activity. This intense electrical activity causes a temporary disruption to the way the brain normally works, meaning that the brain's messages become mixed up. The result is an epileptic seizure.

The brain is responsible for all the functions of your body. What you experience during a seizure will depend on where in your brain the epileptic activity begins and how widely and rapidly it spreads.

For this reason, there are many different types of seizure and each person will experience epilepsy in a way that is unique to them.

## The causes of epilepsy

There are many types of epilepsy. Some types start when you are very young, and some in later life. Some types last for a short time and other types can last for the whole of your life.

Sometimes the reason epilepsy develops is clear. It could be because of brain damage caused by a difficult birth, a severe blow to the head, a stroke, or an infection of the brain such as meningitis. Very occasionally the cause is a brain tumour. In around six out of ten people, doctors don't know the cause of their epilepsy. For many of these people, it is just part of how they are made that makes them more likely to have a seizure.

Epilepsy is currently defined as the tendency to have recurrent seizures. It is unusual to be diagnosed with epilepsy after only one seizure. Around five people in every 100 will have an epileptic seizure at some time in their life.

## Treatment of epilepsy

Epilepsy is usually treated with epilepsy medicines. You may also hear these referred to as anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). Epilepsy medicines act on the brain, trying to reduce seizures or stop seizures from happening. Lots of people with epilepsy find that when they have the right medicine, they have fewer or no seizures. In the UK seven out of ten of people with epilepsy could be seizure free with the right treatment.

## Why seizures happen

Electrical activity is happening in our brain all the time. A seizure happens when there is a sudden burst of intense electrical activity. This intense electrical activity causes a temporary disruption to the way the brain normally works, meaning that the brain's messages become mixed up. The result is an epileptic seizure.

## Things that trigger seizures

Some things make seizures more likely for some people with epilepsy. These are often referred to as 'triggers'. Triggers are things like stress, not sleeping well and drinking too much alcohol. Some people say they have more seizures if they miss meals. Not taking your epilepsy medicine is another common trigger. A very small number of people with epilepsy have seizures triggered by lights that flash or flicker.

## First Aid for seizures

Please watch this short film

<http://www.epilepsy.org.uk/info/firstaid>

## Tonic-Clonic seizures

The person goes stiff, loses consciousness and then falls to the ground. This is followed by jerking movements. A blue tinge around the mouth is likely. This is due to irregular breathing. Loss of bladder and/or bowel control may happen. After a minute or two the jerking movements should stop and consciousness may slowly return.

### **Do...**

- Protect the person from injury - (remove harmful objects from nearby)
- Cushion their head
- Look for an epilepsy identity card or identity jewellery
- Aid breathing by gently placing them in the recovery position once the seizure has finished
- Stay with the person until recovery is complete
- Be calmly reassuring

### **Don't...**

- Restrain the person's movements
- Put anything in the person's mouth
- Try to move them unless they are in danger
- Give them anything to eat or drink until they are fully recovered
- Attempt to bring them round

### **Call for an ambulance if...**

- You know it is the person's first seizure, or
- The seizure continues for more than five minutes, or
- One tonic-clonic seizure follows another without the person regaining consciousness between seizures, or
- The person is injured during the seizure, or
- You believe the person needs urgent medical attention

### Focal (partial) seizures

Sometimes the person may not be aware of their surroundings or what they are doing.

They may pluck at their clothes, smack their lips, swallow repeatedly, and wander around.

#### **Do...**

- Guide the person from danger
- Stay with the person until recovery is complete
- Be calmly reassuring
- Explain anything that they may have missed

#### **Don't...**

- Restrain the person
- Act in a way that could frighten them, such as making abrupt movements or shouting at them
- Assume the person is aware of what is happening, or what has happened
- Give the person anything to eat or drink until they are fully recovered
- Attempt to bring them round

#### **Call for an ambulance if...**

- You know it is the person's first seizure
- The seizure continues for more than five minutes
- The person is injured during the seizure
- You believe the person needs urgent medical attention