



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a medical condition that results in recurring seizures. There are several different types of epilepsy, causing different types of seizures. It is important that people with epilepsy understand the type and pattern of their seizures, and take their epilepsy medicines regularly.

A seizure is a sudden, brief and temporary disruption of the normal electrical activity in the brain. This disruption causes temporary changes in thoughts, feelings, sensations, behavior, movement or consciousness. Not everyone who experiences a seizure has epilepsy. A person with epilepsy has recurring seizures.

Triggers for seizures

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

- Lack of sleep
- Stress
- Menstruation
- Missing meals
- Flickering lights
- Illness
- Fever
- Head trauma
- Alcohol
- Caffeine
- Some medicines
- Some drugs (e.g., marijuana)
- Epilepsy medicine changes.

Causes of epilepsy

Causes of epilepsy include:

- Brain damage (e.g., stroke)
- Brain infection
- Brain tumor
- Head injuries
- Inherited genes.

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 anti-epileptic medicines suddenly.
- Do not change brands of anti-epileptic medicine without your doctor's approval.
- The risk of seizures can make some activities dangerous (e.g., driving a car, operating machinery). Australia has certain laws about driving with epilepsy.

Types of seizures

Common types of epileptic seizures include:

Generalised tonic-clonic seizures

Also called convulsions or fits. The person suddenly goes stiff and falls down and their limbs shake or jerk. They may groan or cry out, go blue or red in the face, bite their tongue, dribble, froth at the mouth, vomit or breathe noisily. They may also lose bladder and/or bowel control. The seizure may last a few minutes. Afterwards the person may be drowsy, confused, or agitated. They may have a headache and may want to sleep.

Absence seizures

The person stops what they are doing and 'goes blank' or stares for a few seconds. Their eyes may roll upwards or flicker and their face may twitch. These seizures commonly begin in childhood and can be mistaken for daydreaming. Children may have trouble learning and paying attention at school due to these absences.

Complex partial seizures

Only part of the brain is affected and the signs and symptoms depend on which part is affected. The person may suddenly become vague, confused, unresponsive or unaware of their surroundings. They may do strange and repetitive actions such as smacking the lips or fiddling with hair or clothes. The seizure may last a few minutes. The person may be drowsy and confused afterwards.

Medicines

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

- Different types of epilepsy respond differently to different types of medicine.
- Anti-epilepsy medicines must be taken regularly at the prescribed dose.
- Changing to a different brand of medicine may trigger seizures. Check with your doctor before changing brands.
- Missing doses or suddenly stopping medicines may trigger seizures.
- Anti-epilepsy medicines can cause side effects.
- Alcohol can interact with anti-epilepsy medicine.
- Some anti-epilepsy medicines can interact with other medicines, including complementary medicines (e.g., the effectiveness of oral contraceptives is reduced by some anti-epileptic medicines). Check with a doctor or pharmacist before taking any other medicine.
- Illness, diarrhoea and vomiting may alter the effects of anti-epilepsy medicines.
- Some people who have been free of seizures for several years are able to stop their anti-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
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grains. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week
- Limit alcohol to low-risk drinking levels
- Limit caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Tell your doctor if you are planning a pregnancy. Medicines may need to be altered and folic acid supplements considered
- 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, avoid sharp edges on furniture)
- Have showers rather than baths
- Watch television or use a computer in a well lit room and take regular breaks

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

First aid for tonic-clonic seizures

1. Stay with and protect person having seizure:
 - Protect from injury (e.g., clear area, put something soft under head)
 - Note time and length of seizure
 - Do not restrict movement
 - Do not put anything in mouth.
2. Manage injuries:
 - Place on side as soon as possible, with head turned to keep airway clear
 - Manage injuries resulting from seizure
 - Do not disturb if person falls asleep
 - Continue to check for consciousness, clear airway, breathing, circulation
 - Stay with person until he/she recovers.
3. Call 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
 - Seizure occurs in water
 - Person is pregnant or has diabetes
 - You believe it to be the person's first seizure.

- Always swim with other people, not by yourself. Wear a life jacket for water sports
- Wear a helmet when riding a bike or horse, rollerblading or doing any activity with a risk of head injury
- Join an epilepsy association for support and information.

Related fact cards

- *Alcohol*
- *First Aid in the Home*
- *Relaxation Techniques*

For more information

Epilepsy Australia – National Helpline – phone 1300 852 853 or website www.epilepsyaustralia.net

Epilepsy Action Australia – phone 1300 37 45 37 or website www.epilepsy.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

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

Sponsored by

Janssen-Cilag