



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 change in electrical activity in the brain. This change causes temporary changes in sensation, behavior, movement or consciousness. Not everyone who experiences a seizure has epilepsy.

Triggers for seizures

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

- Lack of sleep
- Menstruation
- Missing meals
- Illness
- Fever
- Some medicines and drugs
- Epilepsy medicine changes.
- Stress
- Alcohol
- Flickering lights

Causes of epilepsy

Causes of epilepsy include:

- Brain damage
- 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.
- Never stop anti-epileptic medicines suddenly.
- 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 seizures include:

Generalised tonic-clonic seizures

Also called convulsions or fits. The person falls down, goes stiff and shakes or jerks. They are usually unconscious and may dribble or breathe noisily. They may also lose bladder and/or bowel control. Seizures usually last one to three minutes. Afterwards the person is often confused and drowsy. They may have a headache and want to sleep.

Absence seizures

The person stops what they are doing and 'goes blank' or stares for 5-30 seconds. The eyes may roll upwards or flicker. These seizures commonly begin in childhood and can be mistaken for day-dreaming. 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 look suddenly vague, be unresponsive or unaware of their surroundings. Unusual actions such as chewing, fiddling with clothing or wandering may occur. Seizures can last a few seconds to a few minutes. The person may be confused for a short time 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).

- Anti-epilepsy medicines must be taken regularly at the prescribed dose.
- Different types of epilepsy respond differently to different types of medicine.
- Changing to a different brand of medicine may trigger seizures.
- 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 the oral contraceptive pill 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

To help manage epilepsy:

- Learn about the type of epilepsy you have and try to avoid things that trigger your seizures
- Keep a record of your seizures
- Get enough sleep
- Learn and practice relaxation techniques to manage stress
- Eat healthy, balanced and regular meals.
- Exercise regularly
- 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
- Sit in a well-lit room when watching television or using a computer and take regular breaks
- Always swim with other people, not by yourself. Wear a life jacket when boating.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- Wear a helmet when riding a bike or horse, rollerblading etc
- Join an epilepsy association for support and information.

First aid for seizures

1. Check breathing and circulation – follow DRABC.
2. Protect person having seizure:
 - Protect from injury
 - Do not restrict movement
 - Do not put anything in mouth.
3. Manage injuries:
 - Place on side as soon as possible, to keep airway clear
 - Manage injuries resulting from seizure
 - Do not disturb if person falls asleep
 - Continue to check for signs of life.
4. Seek medical aid if:
 - Seizure continues for more than five minutes
 - Another seizure quickly follows
 - The person has been injured
 - The person does not recover.

Related fact cards

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

For more information

Epilepsy Australia, The National Coalition of Australian Associations – National Helpline – phone 1300 852 853 or website www.epilepsyaustralia.org

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.

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

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

