
Epilepsy Fact Sheet

Do you know someone with epilepsy? Chances are you do. Epilepsy is more common than most people think. Epilepsy is a treatable medical condition that can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time. In fact, 1 in 10 people will experience a seizure in their lifetime, and 1 in 100 people in the United States, including 1 in 100 Hispanics, have epilepsy. But despite the prevalence of epilepsy, many people hold potentially harmful misconceptions about both the condition and seizures. Knowing the facts about epilepsy is important to ensure people receive the treatment and respect they need and deserve.

Frequently Asked Questions About Epilepsy:

What Is Epilepsy? What Are Seizures?

Epilepsy is a treatable medical condition that affects the brain and can cause people to have seizures. Seizures are brief electrical disturbances — or energy surges — among brain cells.

What Causes Epilepsy?

Some known causes are severe head injuries, brain tumors and infections, strokes, and problems before or during birth. Epilepsy can also run in families.

Who Is Affected?

Epilepsy can happen to anyone, anywhere, at any time, but it is most likely to occur for the first time among children under age 2 or adults over age 65.

What Does a Seizure Look Like?

It depends on how much of the brain is affected. If it's only part of the brain, the person might have a muscle spasm; mumble; smell, hear or taste something that does not exist; or pick at buttons or display other repetitive behaviors. If the surge covers the entire brain, the person either blacks out, stops speaking and stares for a few seconds; or blacks out, falls to the floor and shakes.

If I Have a Seizure, Do I Have Epilepsy?

Not necessarily. A seizure can be caused by diabetes, a high fever, lack of oxygen or other factors. Epilepsy means a person is more likely to have seizures.

What Is the Difference Between Seizures and Epilepsy?

Seizures are a symptom of epilepsy. Epilepsy is the underlying tendency of the brain to produce sudden bursts of electrical energy that disrupt other brain functions.

Is There a Cure for Epilepsy?

Not yet. But the seizures can be controlled with medication, vagus nerve stimulation, diet or surgery. And sometimes, the seizures just go away. Research to find a cure is ongoing.

Is Epilepsy Ever Contagious?

No, epilepsy is never contagious. You cannot catch epilepsy from someone else and nobody can catch it from you.

Do People With Epilepsy Need Constant Supervision?

No, most people with epilepsy do not need supervision and can lead independent lives.

What Should I Do If I Suspect a Seizure Disorder?

If you think you or a loved one might be having seizures, it is important to discuss with your physician what has been happening. Keep a record of how often the unusual episode occurs, the time of day it happens and what form it takes.

What Should I Consider If There Has Been Only a Single Seizure?

When someone has never had a seizure before, the first seizure is usually followed by a careful medical evaluation to help the doctor decide whether to recommend treatment with seizure-preventing drugs, or to wait and see whether another seizure occurs. Age, family history and possible causes of the seizure are among the factors that are considered. In many cases, the doctor will recommend waiting to see if another seizure occurs before beginning treatment.

How Is Epilepsy Diagnosed?

The doctor's main tool in diagnosing epilepsy is a careful medical history with as much information as possible about what the seizures looked like and what happened just before they began. Other tools include an EEG (electroencephalograph), CT (computerized tomography), MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), or PET (positron emission tomography) imaging, which are used to identify areas of the brain that are producing seizures.

How Can People Guard Against Having Seizures?

A person with epilepsy can help control his or her seizures by following a special diet, taking the prescribed medication regularly, maintaining regular sleep cycles, avoiding unusual stress and working closely with his or her physician. However, seizures may occur even when someone is doing everything he or she is supposed to.

How Is Epilepsy Treated?

Epilepsy may be treated with drugs, surgery, a special diet or an implanted device programmed to stimulate the vagus nerve (VNS therapy). Of these treatments, drug therapy is by far the most common, and is usually the first to be tried.

Which Doctors Treat Epilepsy?

Neurologists, pediatric neurologists, pediatricians, neurosurgeons, internists and family physicians all provide treatment for epilepsy. Specialized care for people whose seizures are difficult to control is available in large medical centers, at neurological clinics at university and other hospitals, and from neurological specialists in private practice.