Seizure Triggers & Precipitants

There are many common triggers that can cause seizures. The most common trigger is electronic screen games, which may cause seizures in some people. How close a person is to the screen may also be a factor. Other forms of reflex epilepsy include seizures triggered by activities such as complex thinking tasks like doing mathematics or reading, certain types of music, and even eating, or soaking in hot water. These are rare forms of epilepsy, and the causes are mostly unclear.

More About Low Levels of Minerals in the Body:

Minerals are essential nutrients. Low levels of the minerals sodium, calcium, and magnesium can alter the electrical activity of brain cells and cause seizures. Having low levels of these minerals in your body is rare. It is usually caused by severe malnutrition, but the following factors may lower mineral levels in your body:

- Low sodium levels may be caused by medications such as diuretics (water pills) or carbamazepine and oxcarbazepine (Tegretol, Carbatrol, Trileptal).
- Drinking too much water and certain hormonal disorders can lower sodium levels.
- Low calcium levels are most often caused by kidney disease or hormonal disorders. They also may be linked to low magnesium levels.
- Low magnesium levels can be caused by chronic abuse of alcohol or from poor nutrition. Low magnesium levels can lead to seizures and can cause low calcium levels.

If you have additional questions, please contact the Epilepsy Foundation at 1-800-332-1000 or visit www.epilepsy.com.

About the Epilepsy Foundation

The Epilepsy Foundation, a national non-profit with 47 affiliated organizations throughout the United States, has led the fight against seizures since 1968. The Foundation is an unwavering ally for individuals and families impacted by epilepsy and seizures. The mission of the Epilepsy Foundation is to stop seizures and sudden unexpected death in epilepsy (SUDEP), find a cure and overcome the challenges created by epilepsy through efforts including education, advocacy and research to accelerate ideas into therapies. The Foundation works to ensure that people with seizures have the opportunity to live their lives to their fullest potential. For additional information, please visit www.epilepsy.com.

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This publication is designed to provide general information about epilepsy and seizures to the public. It is not intended as medical advice. People with epilepsy should not make changes to treatment or activities based on this information without first consulting their healthcare provider.
Most people do not know exactly what causes their seizures on a given day. However, some people find that seizures are more likely to happen in certain situations or under certain conditions. Those things that make it more likely that you will have a seizure are called **seizure triggers**.

Not all people with epilepsy have seizure triggers. For those that do, triggers can vary from person to person. To understand what might trigger your seizures, it is important to keep an accurate record of your seizures and possible triggers. This will help you figure out what may bring on your seizures.

One great way to help you notice possible seizure triggers is to use a seizure diary. By using a seizure diary, you might notice that most of your seizures happen only when you wake up or only when you are under a lot of stress. Or, you might notice that your seizures occur more often when you don’t get enough sleep.

The most common seizure trigger is missing a dose of medicine. Epilepsy medicines work best when medicine levels in the blood remain at a same level all the time. Unfortunately, medicines do not stop all seizures for some people. Seizures that happen, even when medication is taken exactly as directed by your doctor, are called ‘breakthrough’ seizures.

Many things can trigger seizures and increase the likelihood of a breakthrough seizure. The most common of these include:

- Missing seizure medication
- Sleep deprivation (not getting enough sleep)
- Stress
- Flashing lights in people who are photosensitive
- Menstrual cycles in women
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Starting or stopping prescription medications (talk with your doctor before starting or stopping)
- Illnesses, especially those including fever, diarrhea and vomiting
- Low levels of certain minerals in the body, including low sodium, calcium or magnesium

Once a seizure trigger has been identified, you can reduce exposure to the trigger. You might also take additional antiepileptic medications. Be sure to speak with your doctor before changing your medication dosage. Having healthy daily routines can also help you increase seizure control. Here are some things that can help:

- **Keep a regular sleep pattern** – go to bed and get up at the same time each day.
- **Drink plenty of fluids** and stay hydrated.
- **Exercise** in a safe manner – avoid getting dehydrated or anything that might injure your head.
- **Be aware of situations** that might increase the chance of you having a seizure.
- **Record seizures** and possible seizure triggers in a diary.

### More About Menstrual Cycles:

Approximately half the women of childbearing age who have epilepsy report an increase in seizures around the time of their monthly menstrual period. Seizures occurring around the time of menstruation are referred to as catamenial epilepsy. Studies reveal that the highest seizure frequency occurs just before the period is to begin and during the ovulatory phase. If the number of seizures you have goes up at this time of the month, talk with your doctor about ways to improve seizure control.

More About Reflex Epilepsies and Photosensitivity:

Some people are sensitive to specific seizure triggers such as flashing or flickering lights (called photosensitive epilepsy), certain kinds of music, or certain thinking tasks. This is an inherited type of epilepsy known as reflex epilepsy. It is not common.

The reflex epilepsies usually begin in childhood and are often outgrown by adulthood. For people with photosensitive epilepsy, watching television is probably

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**I started using a seizure diary 6 months ago. I was surprised to discover that most of my seizures happened in the 2 or 3 days just before I started my menstrual period. – Jill**

**When I didn’t get enough sleep I definitely had seizures more often. Now I make sure to go to bed and get up at the same time each day. This has made a big difference for me. – Jeremy**