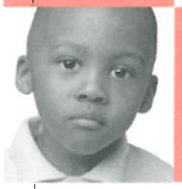
Epilepsy Fact Sheet



What Is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a physical condition caused by sudden, brief changes in the brain's electrical balance. Epilepsy is often called a "seizure disorder." Both terms are used to describe recurring seizures.

Epilepsy, from the Greek word meaning "to seize," is a neurological disorder.

What Is A Seizure?

When there are excess electrical discharges in the brain, seizures occur. Seizures can alter awareness, physical movements, consciousness or actions. They may be accompanied by one or more of the following symptoms: a vacant stare; stiffening of the muscles or muscle spasms; drooling; loss of bladder or bowel control; a slowing or temporary halt in breathing.

When Does A Seizure Happen?

Most seizures occur without warning, although some people have a funny feeling or a weird smell or taste right before a seizure. This is called an aura. Others find that certain things may trigger a seizure, like not getting enough sleep, stress, anxiety and hormonal changes. A seizure can happen anywhere, at any time.

What Does A Seizure Look Like?

The most commonly recognized type of seizure is a generalized tonic-clonic (grand mal) seizure. When people think of this type of seizure, they usually think of someone falling down unconscious and shaking. This type of seizure usually lasts for several minutes.

Another common type of seizure, especially in young children, is an absence (petit mal) seizure that is characterized by a blank stare, beginning and ending abruptly, lasting only a few seconds. This type of seizure may also be accompanied by rapid eye blinking or chewing movements of the mouth. While this type of seizure involves loss of awareness, the person having an absence seizure will quickly return to full awareness.

These are just two examples of the most common types of seizures. Other seizure types include simple partial, complex partial, atonic and myoclonic seizures.

How Many People Does Epilepsy Affect?

More Americans have a diagnosis of epilepsy than Americans with Parkinson's disease, cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy combined. Epilepsy is the third most common neurological disorder after stroke and Alzheimer's disease. It affects 5 million Americans of all ages. Approximately 200,000 new cases of epilepsy occur each year, most often in young children or senior citizens. One in every 10 Americans will experience a seizure at some point in their lives. Three percent of those people will eventually develop epilepsy.

How Is Epilepsy Treated?

The most common treatment for epilepsy/seizure disorder is anti-epileptic medications. Many people who have epilepsy can control their seizures by taking medicines. However, the side effects of medications are often severe and a small percentage of people with epilepsy do not respond well to medications and have little or no control over their seizures. It is often said that the side effects of anti-epileptic medications are more disabling than the seizures themselves. Surgical treatments or a special diet (called a "ketogenic" diet) are sometimes recommended for the treatment of epilepsy.

What Causes Epilepsy?

In nearly 70% of cases, the cause is unknown. The most common causes for the remaining 30% include head trauma, brain tumors and strokes, poisoning, infection and maternal injury. Some rare forms are genetic. Epilepsy is never contagious.

Does Having Epilepsy Mean That Someone Is Different?

People who have epilepsy are not developmentally delayed, mentally ill, dangerous or have a "certain look." Most people with epilepsy lead normal and happy lives. They go to school, get jobs, get married and have children. Epilepsy does not limit a person's ability. People who have epilepsy should be treated like everyone else.

EPILEPSY FOUNDATION®
WESTERN/CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA
Not another moment lost to seizures™

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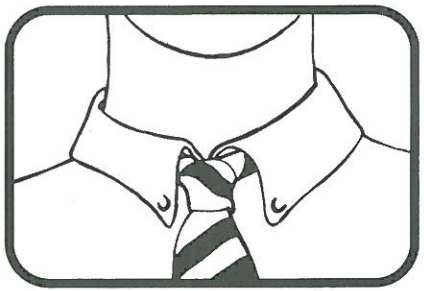
First Aid for Seizures

Convulsion, generalized tonic – clonic, grand mal seizure

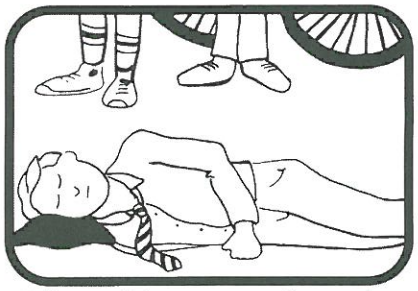
Call For Medical Help If:

- A seizure lasts more than five minutes.
- The person does not resume breathing after the seizure. (If necessary, start rescue breathing while you're waiting for the ambulance.)
- The person has one seizure after another.
- The person is injured, pregnant, has diabetes or appears ill.
- The person requests it.
- There is no medical I.D. for epilepsy and the person is not known to have epilepsy.

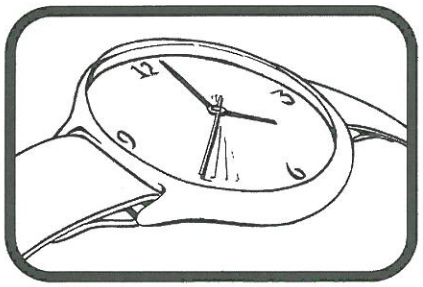
Ease the person to a safe position. Cushion the head.



Loosen any tight neckwear or clothing around neck.

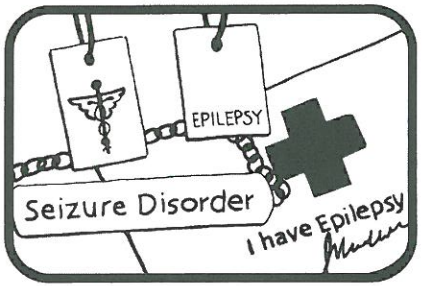


Move objects away from the person that could hurt them and turn them on their side.



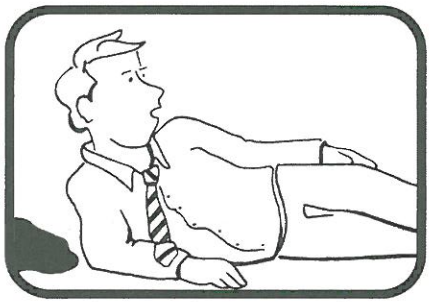
Track time, and remain nearby until the seizure ends.

Do not put anything in the mouth or give oral medication until fully conscious.



Check for epilepsy or seizure disorder I.D.

Do not restrain the person. This may cause injuries to the person.



Afterward, reassure the person. Allow them to rest, if necessary.

Stay with the person until they are fully awake and reoriented.

Where Can I Get Additional Information About Epilepsy?

Contact the Epilepsy Foundation's Western PA office at **1-800-361-5885**, the Central PA office at **1-800-336-0301**, the South Central PA office at **814-262-7494** or Northwestern PA at **814-451-1135**. Visit our website: **www.efwp.org**

REMEMBER: ***If you see someone having a seizure, you can help. You can't do anything to stop the seizure, but you may be able to prevent and/or minimize injury that might occur as a result of the seizure.***