

SAMHS INFO BULLETIN



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What Is a Seizure and What Is Epilepsy?

Seizures -- abnormal movements or behavior due to unusual electrical activity in the brain -- are a symptom of epilepsy. But not all people who appear to have seizures have epilepsy; epilepsy is a group of related disorders characterized by a tendency for recurrent seizures.

Non-epileptic seizures (called pseudoseizures) are not accompanied by abnormal electrical activity in the brain and may be caused by psychological issues or stress. However, non-epileptic seizures look like true seizures, which make diagnosis more difficult. Normal EEG readings and lack of response to epileptic drugs are two clues they are not true epileptic seizures. These types of seizure may be treated with psychiatric medications.

Provoked seizures are single seizures that may occur as the result of trauma, low blood sugar (hypoglycemia), low blood sodium, high fever, or alcohol or drug abuse. Fever-related (or febrile) seizures may occur during infancy but are usually outgrown by age 6. After a careful evaluation to estimate the risk of recurrence, patients who suffer a single seizure may not need treatment.

Seizure disorder is a general term used to describe any condition in which seizures may be a symptom. Seizure disorder is a general term that it is often used in place of the term 'epilepsy.'

Who Is Affected by Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a relatively common condition, affecting 0.5% to 1% of the population. In the United States, about 2.5 million people have epilepsy and about 9% of Americans will have at least one seizure in their lifetimes.

What Causes Epilepsy?

Epilepsy may be caused by head injuries or brain infections, but sometimes no cause can be found.

Epilepsy occurs as a result of abnormal electrical activity originating in the brain. Brain cells communicate by sending electrical signals in an orderly pattern. In epilepsy, these electrical signals become abnormal, giving rise to an "electrical storm" that produces seizures. These storms may be within a specific part of the brain or be generalized, depending on the type of epilepsy.

Types of Epilepsy

Patients with epilepsy may experience more than one seizure type. This is because seizures are only symptoms. Therefore, it is essential that your neurologist diagnose your type of epilepsy, not just the type(s) of seizure you are having.

How Is Epilepsy Treated?

The majority of epileptic seizures are controlled through drug therapy. Diet may also be used along with medications.

In certain cases in which medications and diet are not working, surgery may be used. The type of treatment prescribed will depend on several factors, including the frequency and severity of the seizures, as well as the person's age, overall health, and medical history.

An accurate diagnosis of the type of epilepsy is also critical to choosing the best treatment.

Coping With Epilepsy

Educational, social, and psychological treatment are all part of the total treatment plan for epilepsy. The most important step you can take is to seek help as soon as you feel less able to cope. Epilepsy is best managed by a team of doctors that can provide medical, psycho-social and educational support. If you have a problem with school, work, finances, relationships, or daily activities, it is important for you to discuss it with a member of the epilepsy team of Neurology.

Taking action early will enable you to understand and deal with the many effects of epilepsy. Learning to manage stress will help you maintain a positive physical, emotional, and spiritual outlook on life.