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Epilepsy

by Natalie J. Dahl, MS, CCC-SLP



Epilepsy comes from Greek word meaning “to hold or seize.” It is a disease of the central nervous system in which electrical signals of the brain misfire. These disruptions cause communication problems between nerve cells, leading to seizures. Approximately 3 million Americans have this disorder. Anyone can develop epilepsy at any age, but most new diagnoses are in children. Some outgrow seizures by the time they are teenagers, but some have it throughout their lives.

Epilepsy is diagnosed by a neurologist. The doctor may order tests, which may include an EEG, an MRI test, and/or a CAT scan, in order to view brain activity. He may also order blood tests. In children, more than half of the cases are idiopathic, meaning there is no clear cause or visible problem in the brain. But epilepsy does have some known causes, including infectious illnesses, such as meningitis or encephalitis; brain malformation during pregnancy; trauma to the brain due to an accident before, during, or after birth or later in childhood; metabolic disorders (chemical imbalances in the brain); brain tumors; blood vessel malformation; strokes; and/or chromosome disorders.

It is important to remember that epilepsy is NOT the only cause of childhood seizures, is NOT a mental illness, does NOT necessarily affect intelligence, is NOT contagious, and does NOT typically worsen over time.

Types of Seizures

Seizures can vary in severity, frequency, duration, and appearance, so it is important to know what the different types look like. There are two main types, partial and generalized.

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• **Partial seizures** only involve part of the brain. They can be simple (no loss of consciousness) or complex (loss of consciousness). There may be twitching of a body part or face, speech may become slurred, vision may be affected, or the person may feel tingling on one side of the body.
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• **Generalized seizures** affect the whole brain at once. There are two different types:

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–**Absence seizures** (also called petit mal) are more common in girls than boys. The person may appear to be daydreaming or staring off into space. The seizure may last about 15 seconds or less and then the person returns to normal activity level.
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–**Tonic-clonic seizures** (also called grand mal) may cause the person’s eyes to roll back, the muscles may stiffen, and he or she may make sudden jerking motions. The person may also go limp, fall over, and lose control of the bowel or bladder.



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What are treatments?

A neurologist will prescribe treatment based on the test and exam results. Medication is typically the first type of treatment, but side effects are possible. These may include tiredness, decreased alertness, and mood or behavioral concerns. If single medications are not effective, more complicated treatments may be tried, such as a combination of medications, a ketogenic diet, implantation of a nerve stimulator in the chest and neck, or surgery to remove the affected part of the brain.



Can epilepsy affect development and communication?

Epilepsy can affect language, but the extent and nature can vary widely. It can cause temporary loss of function in one or more parts of the brain. If these parts are involved with understanding, organization, and communication, difficulties in language can result. These difficulties can be mild to severe. When children have epilepsy at a young age, they may have difficulty in acquiring communication skills at a rate that is similar to other children. This difficulty may also have an effect on reading and writing. Adults with epilepsy often complain of difficulties with language, especially in coming up with words. For most adults, this is not a severe problem, with the exception of those whose seizures are a result of a trauma to the part of the brain that affects language skills. Someone with epilepsy may have other neurological problems that cause learning disabilities or behavior problems. He or she may have side effects from medication that may cause inattentiveness or word-finding difficulties.

It is important to be aware of the types of seizures and what should be done if someone near you is having a seizure. If you are concerned about the speech and language development of a child diagnosed with epilepsy, contact a speech-language pathologist for further information.

If someone near you is having a seizure, it is very important to **stay calm** and take the following steps:



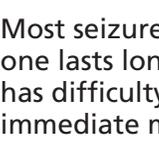
- Place the person away from furniture, stairs, or hard objects.



- Remove the person's glasses and loosen any tight clothing.



- Put something soft under the person's head.



- Lay the person on his or her side so that he or she won't choke.



- Do not try to restrain the person.

- Stay with the person until he or she wakes up.

Most seizures are not life-threatening, but if one lasts longer than 5 minutes or if the person has difficulty breathing afterward, call 911 for immediate medical attention.

Resources:

"Epilepsy," KidsHealth, accessed October 17, 2017, <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/epilepsy.html?ref=search&WT.ac=msh-p-dtop-en-search-clk>.

"Types of Language Problems in Epilepsy," Epilepsy Foundation, accessed October 17, 2017, <https://www.epilepsy.com/article/2014/3/types-language-problems-epilepsy>.

"Epilepsy and Speech and Language," Inclusive Technology, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.inclusive.co.uk/articles/epilepsy-and-speech-and-language-a301>

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