

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a tendency to have recurrent seizures. Having epilepsy usually means that you have had one or more seizures and are likely to have others if they are left untreated.

Seizures are sudden, temporary changes in the normal activity of the brain. During a seizure the brain cells fire much faster and all at once. This can affect your level of consciousness, body movements and how you think or feel.

Seizures can also happen because of a reaction to a strong medication or alcohol. Children can have seizures when ill with a high fever, or some people have seizures related to other sicknesses such as kidney failure. **These seizures are not epilepsy.**

Anyone can get epilepsy at any age.

What cause epilepsy?

There are many causes of epilepsy, and a large number of people never find out why they have epilepsy. Some known causes are:

- Injuries to the brain or head, such as a car accident or serious fall.
- Lack of oxygen to the brain such as in a heart attack or drug overdose.
- Strokes and brain haemorrhages.
- Infections of the brain such as meningitis, encephalitis, or a brain abscess.
- Some people inherit epilepsy.

What triggers or 'sets off' seizures?

The most common triggers of seizures in people who have epilepsy are:

- Lack of sleep or over-tiredness
- Missing medication
- Emotional or physical stress



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- Other triggers include being unwell such as having colds, flu or vomiting and diarrhoea; having low blood sugar and poor nutrition; flashing lights; hormonal changes in females, growth spurts in children and adolescents, and many more.

Types of seizures

Seizures can be classified into two main groups:

1. **Partial seizures** begin in a small region of the brain, called the ‘focus’. 60% of people with epilepsy have partial seizures. There are two types of partial seizures: Simple and Complex. Your seizure type depends on if your consciousness is changed or not.

Simple Partial seizures	The person stays alert and aware of what is happening around them and to them. Symptoms include nausea, changes in taste or smell, feeling afraid, déjà vu or sensations that are difficult to describe. Simple partial seizures are also termed an ‘aura’ or warning, and are usually brief.
Complex Partial seizures	Consciousness or awareness is altered. The person may seem vague and stare blankly. They can also do things like fidget, fumble with clothing, chew, walk aimlessly and carry out other purposeless movements. Afterwards they are often confused for a short time, tired, and have little or no memory of the event.

2. **Generalised seizures** start in the whole brain all at once. The two most common types of generalised seizures are:

Absence seizures (‘petit mal’)	The person suddenly stops what they are doing, stares and at times may roll the eyes upwards or blink. Then just as quickly, they will continue with what they were doing. These can happen numerous times a day, lasting a few seconds, and are often mistaken for daydreaming. The person is not aware of having these seizures.
Tonic clonic seizures (‘grand mal’)	These begin with a sudden loss of consciousness followed by stiffening of all the muscles (tonic) for a few seconds. This may cause a fall or force the person to cry out. After this begins a rhythmic jerking of the muscles (clonic). This phase lasts from 1-3 minutes. During the seizure the person isn’t breathing properly, so their colour becomes very pale, sometimes blueish. Sometimes they may lose control of their bladder. They may bit their tongue or cheek, so blood may come out of their mouth. Breathing is very heavy for a short time afterwards, and the person is often quite confused and very sleepy.

Living with epilepsy

There are lots of reasons to care about your health - like feeling good, looking good, and getting stronger, doing well in school, at work, in sports and in other activities. Believe it or not, these can all be affected by your health!

Life with epilepsy is not always rosy, but people with good seizure-control can lead normal lives. They are often more limited by the attitudes and misunderstanding of others than by the epilepsy itself. Just remember...

- Epilepsy is not necessarily a lifelong condition
- Over 70% of people stop having seizures once they start medications
- There are many different seizure types
- Many people have never had a convulsive seizure
- Epilepsy is condition of the brain, NOT a mental, emotional or psychological problem
- Epilepsy should not be a barrier to success
- Living with epilepsy is more than just taking medications.
- Be positive - You can do anything you put your mind to.
- A healthy, active life is also very important.
- Your health begins with you!

Driving

Driving is a big deal for most young people. It can provide a sense of freedom and independence. People with epilepsy usually can get their driver's licence if seizures are controlled.

1. As you get closer to driving age, it may be worth having your epilepsy reviewed. If you have had no seizures for at least 2 years, talk to the doctor about lowering and eventually stopping medications a good 6 months or a year before getting your licence.
2. If your seizures are not controlled, this may be a good time for further review and possible changes in the treatment plan.
3. Taking your medication and keeping yourself healthy really helps with seizure control. Seizure control will help you get your licence.

If you can't drive...

Catch a lift with a friend. Take the bus. Call a cab. Ride a bike. Walk. There are plenty of other ways to get around. **Remember, it may not always be like this.**



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School

People with epilepsy can have difficulties with attention, concentration and memory. Find out what your school or university offers to help - and identify and build on your strengths. Parents or teachers may have expectations that are above or below your ability. Sometimes a different environment or teaching technique is all that is needed to help you learn, or understand how you learn best.

Epilepsy should not be a barrier to education and achievement.

Sleep

Getting a good night's sleep is important. If you're a student, or you've ever gone without sleep for a number of days, you'll know that lack of sleep can create challenges. The physical effects are very real and cause a lot of stress to the body. Sleep deprivation is a common trigger for seizures. It can stop anyone from performing at the level they're capable.

Medication

Taking medication not only controls seizures, but helps you get on with all of the above - and with life. The less you have seizures, the less interruption you experience in your daily life.

Family

Sometimes we love them, sometimes times we don't, but let's face it - without them, life wouldn't be the same.

Friends

Friends are important at any age. But when you are growing up, they are the people you can most relate to and feel comfortable with. Sometimes friends feel like the bond that holds everything together in your life. **Most friends are understanding about epilepsy. Often their biggest fear is not knowing what to do.**

If you tell them how you feel, there is a good chance they've felt the same way about a different situation. Just knowing that others understand can improve your ability to cope. A true friend will listen, understand and help when they can.

Feelings

Being a teen isn't fun all the time - especially when the pressures you're experiencing become too much to handle. With epilepsy, there may be extra things to deal with or worry about. Feeling sad sometimes and having mood swings is normal for many teenagers, but feeling sad and depressed for a long time is not.



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These are signs of depression, especially if they last for more than 2 weeks:

- Changes in eating or sleeping habits.
- Sadness that won't go away.
- Losing interest in what used to be fun or interesting.
- No longer hanging out with friends.
- Loss of energy or motivation.
- Drop in grades at school.
- Thoughts of harming or killing yourself.
- Anger and rage.
- Using drugs or alcohol to 'forget' about problems.
- Over-reaction to criticism.
- Lack of concentration or forgetfulness.
- Aches and pains that don't get better with treatment.

Find someone you can talk to about your worries...

It may help to talk to a teacher, parent, relative, older brother or sister, coach, friend, or someone you can trust. Don't struggle alone - let your feelings out. If you need confidential help, try calling a helpline or visiting your school counsellor or doctor. Talking about your feelings is often the first step in getting help and feeling better.

Sports

Whether you are a sporty person or not, any type of physical exercise - big or small - has some benefit. People with epilepsy can play most sports just like everyone else. If your seizures are not well controlled it is advisable to avoid water sports such as scuba-diving or swimming alone, or sports at heights such as rock-climbing or skydiving. Otherwise, get into it - however you can.

Relationships

Most teenagers worry about dating, whether or not they have epilepsy. Dates are scary enough as it is, let alone having to worry about other things like having a seizure. Everyone who has been on a date knows the fear of being rejected. Rejection is normal part of dating and relationships. You may also wonder when to tell someone about your epilepsy. When the relationship feels comfortable it is a good idea to talk about your epilepsy with a person you date regularly.

Life

When there's a lot going on in your life, it's easy to worry about the future. But dwelling on difficulties - either perceived or real - can increase feelings of worry. If you can, try to deal with each day as it comes and do the best you can.

Tips to remember

- Believe in yourself.



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- Believe in your dreams, rights and abilities – but also be realistic.
- Do things that make you happy.
- Keep or develop interests and hobbies.
- Make sure you are seen as a person first. You are not your condition. You are a person with interests, feelings, strengths, and weaknesses, who also has epilepsy.
- Tell your friends it's still okay to be invited out socially and do everyday things.
- Talk to others with epilepsy, or similar issues. They may have their own ways of coping with problems that may help you.
- You are allowed to have bad days. Everybody does. Remember that bad days will eventually be followed by better days.
- Try to think of life as a challenge and not as impossible. Never lose hope.
- Use humour to break the ice when other people are uncomfortable.
- Don't forget to have fun and laugh.
- Learn to accept help from people without feeling guilty or inadequate.
- Let people know when you want to make your own decisions.
- Fight the myths about epilepsy. Educate your close friends and teachers.

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