

**Good observation and recording of seizures is vital to the diagnosis and ongoing management of epilepsy. This guide explains what to do when observing a seizure.**

Seizures present in many different ways. However, few doctors see their patients having seizures. A video plus a good eyewitness description from family, friends, caregivers or teachers can greatly assist with identifying the seizure type. Knowing the seizure type will assist the doctor in prescribing the most effective treatment.

**It is worthwhile asking the person what they felt or remember about the seizure. For witnesses, it is important to describe as best you can what you saw the person do before, during and after the seizure.**

## Seizure stages

Seizures have different stages. It is important to document all stages.

### 1. Beginning of the seizure (ictal period)

This is often termed the 'aura' or 'warning' by many people with epilepsy and is known as a focal seizure (with no loss of awareness). They usually last seconds, but can rarely last several hours. Some people experience feelings such as numbness or tingling, nausea, 'butterflies' in the stomach, fear, an unusual taste or smell, hallucinations, or déjà vu. There may be a change in mood or behaviour. Often people have trouble describing their 'aura'.

**Keeping a diary of seizure details is of great value in looking at progress, management, triggers, patterns and distinguishing seizure-related behaviour from other behaviours.**

#### Important points to observe and record:

**A) What was the person doing immediately prior to the seizure?**

**B) What called your attention to the seizure, e.g. a cry, fall, jerking, staring or head turning?**

### 2. The seizure itself (ictal period)

Seizures can look very different. They can vary from confusion and behavioural changes to convulsive movements. The active phase of the seizure will almost always involve some change in, or loss of, awareness or consciousness. Most seizures will last from a few seconds to less than 3 minutes.

#### Important points to observe and record:

**A) What did the person do during the seizure?**

- What was the first thing you noticed?
- Any head, eye, limb or body movements?
- Was the person staring, wandering, mumbling, fidgeting or displaying any unusual behaviour?
- Did the person appear to be confused?
- Did they make any sounds?
- Did they respond when you spoke to them?
- Did you notice any face colour change such as blushing, blueness or paleness?
- Did they have blood coming from their mouth (from biting their tongue or cheek)?
- Did they lose control of their bladder?



### B) How long did the seizure last?

- If you are observing a tonic clonic seizure, record how long it takes from the time the stiffening or jerking starts until it finishes.
- If you are observing a focal seizure (formerly complex partial seizure), record how long the person was unresponsive, or from the time it appears they are having the seizure.

### 3. Period after the seizure (postictal period)

Few people have an immediate recovery following a seizure. It is common to experience a period of confusion, drowsiness, agitation and possibly speech and coordination problems that can last for a few minutes to several hours. In rare instances, it can last several days. The behaviour during this time can be sometimes mistaken for seizure activity. Occasionally people can experience paralysis or psychosis during this period.

#### Important points to observe and record:

##### A) How did the person appear after the seizure?

- Were they drowsy?
- Did they have difficulties with breathing, speaking, moving or walking?
- Were they confused or disoriented?

##### B) How long did it take for them to respond to you?

##### C) Could they recall anything about the seizure?

### What should you do after the seizure?

- Check the person is breathing normally.
- Check the person for any injuries.
- Note the date and time of the seizure and how long it lasted.
- Record what the person was doing before, during and after the seizure.
- Record what was done during the seizure to keep the person safe.
- Record any medications given before, during or after the seizure.

### Dial 000 for an ambulance if:

- You are in any doubt.
- The seizure occurs in water.
- You arrive after the seizure has started.
- The person is injured.
- There is anything in the person's mouth when the seizure started.
- The seizure lasts longer than five minutes or longer than normal for that person.
- The person is non-responsive for more than 5 minutes after the seizure ends.
- Another seizure follows quickly.
- The person has breathing difficulties after the jerking stops.
- The person has diabetes.
- It is the person's first known seizure.



See our First Aid Posters for more information on what to do.