



EPILEPSY

HEALTH CARE LEAFLET

Introduction

Epilepsy is a condition that affects the brain and causes repeated seizures.

The cells in the brain, known as neurons, conduct electrical signals and communicate with each other using chemical messengers. During a seizure, there are abnormal bursts of neurons firing off electrical impulses, which can cause the brain and body to behave strangely.

The severity of seizures can differ from person to person. Some people simply experience an odd feeling with no loss of awareness, or may have a 'trance-like' state for a few seconds or minutes, while others lose consciousness and have convulsions.

Symptoms of Epilepsy

The main symptoms of epilepsy are repeated seizures (fits). There are many different types of seizure, depending on the area of the brain affected. Seizures can occur when people are awake or asleep.

Doctors classify seizures by how much of the brain is affected. These are:

- **Partial (or focal) seizures** – where only a small part of the brain is affected
- **Generalised seizures** – where most or all of the brain is affected

Partial Seizures

Simple Partial Seizures

These are where the person remains fully conscious throughout. Symptoms can include:

- A general strange feeling that is hard to describe
- A 'rising' feeling in the tummy – like the sensation in your stomach when on a fairground ride
- An intense feeling of déjà vu
- Experiencing an unusual smell or taste
- A tingling sensation in the arms and legs
- A sudden intense feeling of fear or joy
- Stiffness or twitching in part of the body, such as an arm or hand

These seizures are sometimes known as 'warnings' or 'auras' because they can be a sign that another type of seizure is on its way.

Complex partial seizures

These are when someone loses their sense of awareness and can't remember what happened after the seizure has passed. During a complex partial seizure they will not be able to respond to anyone. Symptoms include:

- Smacking their lips
- Rubbing their hands
- Making random noises
- Moving their arms around
- Picking at clothes
- Fiddling with objects
- Adopting an unusual posture
- Chewing or swallowing

Generalised Seizures

Absences - These cause the person to lose awareness of their surroundings, usually for up to 15 seconds. The person will seem to stare vacantly into space, some people flutter their eyes or smack their lips. Absences can occur several times a day.

Myoclonic seizures - These seizures cause the arms, legs or upper body to jerk or twitch, as if they have received an electric shock. They often last only a fraction of a second, and the person will normally remain conscious. They can occur in combination with other types of seizure.

Clonic seizures - These cause the same symptoms as myoclonic seizures, except they last longer, normally up to two minutes. Loss of consciousness may also occur.

Atonic seizures - Atonic seizures cause all the muscles to suddenly relax, so there is a chance the person may fall to the ground and injure themselves.

Tonic seizures - These cause all the muscles to suddenly become stiff which means they can lose their balance and fall over and injure themselves.

Tonic-clonic seizures (Epileptic fit) - These seizures have two stages. The body will initially become stiff and then the arms and legs will begin twitching. They will lose consciousness and some people will wet themselves. The seizure normally lasts a few minutes, but can last longer.

Emergency Procedure

Different types of seizure require different medical attention

Epileptic Fit (Tonic-clonic seizure)

- Protect them from injury by removing any dangerous or potentially harmful objects nearby, and cushioning their head with your hands or soft material
- **Do not** restrain them or attempt to move them (unless they are in immediate danger) and don't put anything in their mouth
- Stay calm, and stay with them until they regain consciousness
- When the convulsions have stopped, put them into the recovery position until they have recovered.

Other Types of Seizure

- Protect them from injury by removing any dangerous or potentially harmful objects nearby, and cushioning their head with your hands or soft material
- Only attempt to move them if they are in immediate danger
- Stay with them and comfort them until they have fully recovered

When to Call an Ambulance

It will not usually be necessary to call an ambulance after a seizure. However you should call 999 if:

- The seizure has not stopped after five minutes
- The person has more than one seizure without recovering in between
- You know it is the person's first seizure
- The person is injured, has breathing problems, or needs emergency medical attention for any other reason
- The person's behaviour after a seizure is unsafe

Status Epilepticus

Status epilepticus is the name for any seizure that lasts longer than 30 minutes, or a series of seizures where the person does not regain consciousness in between. This is a medical emergency and requires treatment as soon as possible. You can be trained to treat it if you care for someone with epilepsy, but if you haven't had any training, it is important to call 999 immediately if you suspect status epilepticus.