

✓ Quick Read Series



Children & Seizures



Information
for parents
and caregivers



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This booklet gives you some basic information about epilepsy. It's not medical advice. Don't change anything about your child's treatment or activities without first talking to a doctor.

WHAT ARE SEIZURES?

Seizures happen when there is a sudden surge of electrical energy in a child's brain.

They cause sudden changes in how a child acts, moves, or feels.

A seizure may affect just one or two things that the brain controls – like a shaking arm, or a strange feeling in the stomach.

Or it may sweep across the child's brain, knocking out awareness or causing a massive muscle jerk.

Seizures end after a few seconds, or a couple of minutes. After the seizure, the child's brain goes back to working normally again.

WHY DO SEIZURES HAPPEN?

Many children have seizures, especially when they are young.

A seizure happens when something stresses a child's brain. A very high fever can cause a seizure in infants or toddlers.

A bad infection that goes to the brain can cause seizures in children of any age.

Seizures that happen with high fever usually go away when the child gets older.

WHAT IS EPILEPSY?

Epilepsy is a disorder of the brain. It also causes seizures.

Seizures caused by epilepsy happen from time to time without fever or for no other special reason.

Epilepsy is also the name for seizures that happen because of an injury or some other condition that can't be changed.

About 1 in every 100 American children has epilepsy.

Some people prefer to call epilepsy a seizure disorder.

EPILEPSY & SEIZURES

Children with epilepsy may have one or more kinds of seizures that look like:

- Blank staring spells that last only a few seconds.
- Falling to the floor, getting stiff and shaking all over.

- Suddenly feeling afraid, or angry for no reason.
- Shaking or jerking of an arm, or leg.
- Picking at clothes, blacking out.
- Groups of jerking movements in a baby.

Some people call them fits, spells or falling out. The name most people use is seizures.

A child cannot stop a seizure or make one happen on purpose.

When you ask about it later, the child probably won't remember what happened.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- **Use a baby monitor. It can help you know if a child has a seizure in his room.**

WHAT CAUSES EPILEPSY?

Most of the time, doctors don't know why a child has epilepsy. Some possible causes are:

- A blow to the head that injures the brain, or

- A scar on the brain from an old injury, or
- A poison, like lead, or
- Something that happened before the baby was born.

HOW IS EPILEPSY TREATED?

Children with epilepsy are usually treated with medicines. The medicines are designed to prevent seizures.

Several kinds of medicines are used to treat epilepsy.

Your doctor will pick the one that seems like the best choice for your child and the kind of seizures he or she is having.

If the seizures keep happening, the doctor will try a different kind of medicine.

This all takes time.

Some medicines may make your child very sleepy, not want to eat, feel dizzy, get a rash, or seem ill in some other way.

If this happens, call the doctor. Your doctor will give you advice about what to do. He may change how

much medicine your child is taking, or he may change the medicine.

Don't stop or change it on your own.

Stopping the medicine or changing it on your own could make your child have a seizure.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- Ask your doctor what to do if your child misses a dose of the epilepsy medicine.

HELPING THE MEDICINE WORK

Here are some ways to help the medicines help your child:

- Give her the medicine at the same times every day.
- Give her exactly the amount of medicine the doctor has said.
- If she's old enough, let her help you count out the pills.
- Tell her why she's taking the pills. Help her see that they're to keep seizures away and to keep her well.

- If your child's medicine is liquid, be sure to shake the bottle well before you pour the dose. That way, your child will get the right amount every time.
- Keep epilepsy medicines and all other medicines in a cool, dry place, out of your child's reach.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- If your child has seizures, don't use bunk beds. Having a seizure in a top bunk could cause the child to fall.

OTHER KINDS OF TREATMENT

Sometimes the meds don't help.

Your child may have tried lots of different ones but still has lots of seizures.

Or the medicines may make him so sleepy that he can't learn or do much of anything.

That's the time to ask your doctor about new medicines or other kinds of treatment. There are three other ways to treat seizures if the meds don't work.

- Surgery
- Special diet
- An electrical implant

Surgery for epilepsy means having an operation on the brain. The doctors remove a small part of the child's brain that's causing the seizures.

Many tests have to be done before the doctors can say if they think an operation would help.

A special **diet**, called the ketogenic diet, helps some children. It uses food as if it is medicine.

There's a lot of fat in the diet. All the child's food has to be weighed for every meal. It has to be followed exactly or it doesn't work.

Another kind of treatment sends electrical signals to the brain from a little battery. Doctors place the battery under the skin near the child's collar-bone. It's done during same day surgery at the local hospital.

This kind of treatment is called VNS (**vagus nerve stimulation**) therapy.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- Check out the Parents Helping Parents section of the Foundation's website.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- Spend special time with your other children. They may feel left out and lonely.

DEALING WITH SEIZURES

If your child has seizures that make him fall, get stiff and shake, make sure that everyone in your family knows what to do.

Here's what they should know:

- Keep calm.
- Check the time as the seizure starts. Keep track of how long it lasts.
- Put something flat and soft under his head. This way it won't bang on the floor when his body shakes.
- Turn him gently on his side so he won't choke.
- Don't put anything in his mouth. He won't swallow his tongue.
- Don't try to hold him down or stop him from shaking.

Most children don't have to go to the hospital every time they have a

seizure. Most seizures end on their own after a couple of minutes.

Still, every child is different. Some seizures last longer. Ask your doctor about what you should do.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- **Get to know other parents who have a child with epilepsy. Call your local Epilepsy Foundation or seizure clinic.**

WHEN TO CALL 911

You and anyone looking after your child should always call 911 when:

- The seizure looks different from the kind your child usually has.
- It lasts longer than five minutes.
- Another seizure happens right after the first one.
- Your child isn't breathing properly or doesn't wake up after the shaking has stopped.
- Your child had a seizure in the water.

Some children often have seizures that happen one after another.

Some children often have seizures that go on for more than five minutes.

If your child has seizures like these, check with your doctor.

Your doctor may tell you how to treat those seizures at home, so you don't have to go to the hospital every time.

WHAT PARENTS ASK

The Epilepsy Foundation gets a lot of questions from parents of children with epilepsy. Here are a few of them:

Q. My daughter hasn't had a seizure in months. Why does she still have to take the medicine?

A. Because it's working. The medicine is doing its job of keeping the seizures away. If she stops taking it, she's likely to have seizures again. Check with your doctor. If she stays seizure free, she may be able to go off the medicine at some point.

But don't try stopping it on your own.

Q. Every time my child has a seizure, I'm afraid he won't wake up. Do children ever die from seizures?

A. It hardly ever happens. But it can. The best way to keep your child safe is to make sure he always takes the medicine on time.

Q. Will my child always have epilepsy?

A. That's hard to know. Some children stop having seizures as they get older.

Children who don't have any seizures for a year or two while they're taking epilepsy medicine have the best chance of growing out it. But every child is different.

Q. How can I help my child at school?

A. Meet with his teacher and the school nurse. Tell them about your child's seizures.

Tell them what his seizures look like. Tell them what you want them to do if he has one at school.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- Take some time for yourself.

Q. My son often doesn't remember what he's told, or what he's been studying. Is that because of the epilepsy?

A. It could be. Some children with epilepsy find it hard to remember things. Some have trouble paying attention.

Sometimes, having a seizure can wipe out a child's memories of what happened before it began. Some medicines may make it harder to remember things, too.

If this is happening to your child, check with your doctor and check with the school. See if special help is available.

Q. How active should my child be? Will running around make her have more seizures?

A. Most children don't have seizures because of being active. Most do better if they can do the same things other kids do.

TO FIND OUT MORE

Call the Epilepsy Foundation toll-free 1-800-332-1000, with any questions you may have, or visit our website at www.epilepsyfoundation.org or write:

Epilepsy Foundation
4351 Garden City Drive
Landover, MD 20785

Your local Epilepsy Foundation can help you get in touch with people in your town or city who can also help you.

TIP FOR PARENTS

- If your child has drop seizures, a helmet and face guard may keep her from being hurt.

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