

✓ Quick Read Series



# Questions & Answers



Information  
about seizures  
and epilepsy



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

## **Q: What is a seizure?**

A seizure is a sudden change in awareness, feeling or movement that you can't control.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- A seizure is caused by an electrical disturbance in your brain.

## **Q: What causes seizures?**

A seizure is caused by an electrical disturbance in your brain.

Anyone can have a seizure if the brain is stressed by infection, fever, injury, lack of oxygen or poisoning.

## **Q: What is epilepsy?**

Epilepsy is the name given to seizures that happen from time to time for no apparent reason.

Epilepsy is sometimes called a seizure disorder.

## **Q: How many people in the U.S. have epilepsy?**

About one in every hundred, currently about 2.5 million Americans.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- The best way of preventing epilepsy is by reducing risks from things that damage the brain.

## **Q: What causes it?**

Sometimes epilepsy starts after a bad head injury.

Sometimes from a brain infection.

Sometimes from long term alcohol or drug abuse.

Sometimes because of something that happened before birth.

And sometimes no one knows why a person suddenly begins to have seizures.

## **Q: Does epilepsy run in families?**

Sometimes it does.

Scientists have found genes for some types of epilepsy.

Often it develops without anyone else in the family having it.

## **Q: Is epilepsy contagious?**

No. Epilepsy is not contagious.

You cannot catch it. You cannot give it to anyone else.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- Epilepsy is sometimes called a seizure disorder.

## **Q: What do seizures look like?**

One kind of seizure makes people fall unconscious, stiffen and then jerk for a couple of minutes.

Another kind of seizure can make people black out for a minute or two.

To other people it would look like sleep-walking or a kind of trance.

Other seizures make people's arms or legs jerk, or make them stop and stare for a few moments.

A seizure can change the way people feel, too, but there's no change in how they look while it's happening.

**Q: What kind of seizure do most people have?**

The most common type of seizure makes a person lose awareness of where he is or what he's doing.

Someone having this type of seizure can't control his actions, speech, or movements until it's over.

### NOW YOU KNOW

- The most common type of seizure makes a person lose awareness of where he is or what he's doing.

**Q: Can people die during a seizure?**

It can happen, but not very often.

The risk is greatest when a person has a seizure that doesn't stop.

That's an emergency and reason to call 911.

People can also die as a result of accidents caused by seizures.

And, in rare cases, people die suddenly and unexpectedly.

**Q: Could someone with epilepsy hurt someone else during a seizure?**

A person who is having a seizure can't control what he's doing, so he can't deliberately attack someone else.

If you grab hold of someone who's having a seizure, he might struggle and strike out.

But he would not be trying to hurt you.

### NOW YOU KNOW

- You should never put anything in the mouth of someone who is having a seizure.

**Q: Should you put something in a person's mouth during a seizure?**

No, you should never put anything in the mouth of someone who is having a seizure.

You should turn the person gently

on one side to make breathing easier and prevent choking.

## **Q: How do doctors treat epilepsy?**

Mostly with daily medication to prevent seizures.

Some children are helped with a special diet.

Some people may be helped by a brain operation or by a nerve stimulation device if the medicines don't work.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- **Drugs control seizures completely in about half of all people with epilepsy.**

## **Q: How well does the treatment work?**

For many people, it works well.

The drugs control seizures completely in about half of all people with epilepsy.

Others still have some seizures, even with treatment.

About one in every four people continues to have a lot of seizures.

## NOW YOU KNOW

- There's no proof that any herbal products or vitamins can prevent seizures.

### **Q: Do vitamins or herbal products prevent seizures?**

So far, there's no proof that any herbal products or vitamins can prevent seizures.

A healthy diet gives you the vitamins and minerals you need.

Having epilepsy usually doesn't mean you need more than other people.

Doctors may tell you to take certain vitamins to make up for the effects of some epilepsy drugs.

Some drugs make bones thinner over time. Your doctor may suggest calcium or other medicine to prevent that.

If you are a woman of child bearing age, ask your doctor how much extra folic acid you should be taking.

## **Q: Does epilepsy affect intelligence?**

Having seizures and taking epilepsy medication may affect memory, attention and concentration in some people.

Brain damage that causes seizures may also reduce mental ability.

In general, though, people with epilepsy have the same range of intelligence as everyone else.

Some are very smart. Some are not.

And most are somewhere in the middle.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- **Brain injuries that produce seizures can also affect mood and behavior.**

## **Q: Is epilepsy a mental illness?**

No. Epilepsy is a disorder of the brain.

Epilepsy and mental illness are different conditions. Still, it's possible for someone to have both.

Sometimes, brain injuries that

produce seizures can also affect mood and behavior.

Quite a lot of people with epilepsy feel sad and worried a lot of the time.

If that sounds like you, check with your doctor. These conditions can be treated successfully.

## NOW YOU KNOW

- Having seizures and taking epilepsy medication may affect memory, attention and concentration in some people.

### **Q: Can you drive if you have epilepsy?**

Yes, you can get a driver's license if you have had no seizures at all for a period of time.

How long you have to wait depends on where you live.

Every state has laws about how long someone with epilepsy must be seizure free before being allowed to drive.

Some states will want the doctor to state that the person with epilepsy is under medical care and can drive safely.

## **Q: Can people with epilepsy hold jobs?**

Yes. People who have epilepsy can work in many kinds of jobs.

It's harder to find jobs if you're still having a lot of seizures, however.

It is illegal for an employer to fire or refuse to hire a qualified person just because he or she has epilepsy.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- People who have epilepsy can work in many kinds of jobs.

## **Q: Can children with epilepsy go to regular schools?**

Yes. And most of them can be in regular classes at school.

Some may need extra help.

## **Q: Could seizures be caused by an evil spirit or a curse?**

No. Epilepsy is no different from any other illness.

Scientists have shown that it

happens because of special conditions in the brain.

## **Q: Can people with epilepsy get insurance?**

Yes, if it's provided under a group plan offered by an employer or other group.

It is much more difficult to get private, individual coverage.

That's because insurance companies often do not want to offer life, health, or auto coverage to people with epilepsy.

They think people with epilepsy are at higher risk.

People may find themselves turned down, or not covered for epilepsy care, or forced to pay very high rates.

Many states now offer pool insurance for those who have been denied private insurance.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- A person who is having a seizure can't control what he's doing.

## **Q: Can people with epilepsy play sports?**

In most cases, yes. A lot depends on how well their seizures are controlled, the type of sport, and what the doctor recommends.

In general, exercise is good for health.

Some say people are likely to have fewer seizures when actively occupied.

### **NOW YOU KNOW**

- People are likely to have fewer seizures when actively occupied.

## **Q: What about swimming?**

A child or adult who has no seizures or very few seizures should be able to swim, but always with a buddy.

The buddy should know about the epilepsy and be able to swim well enough to help in case of a seizure.

**Q: How can I find out more about epilepsy and seizures?**

You can contact your local Epilepsy Foundation. To find out the one nearest you, call 1-800-332-1000 or visit the Epilepsy Foundation's website at [www.epilepsyfoundation.org](http://www.epilepsyfoundation.org).

You can also write to:

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1-800-332-1000

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