Famous People with Epilepsy

For People Living with Epilepsy

Not another moment lost to seizures

Famous People with Epilepsy

World Leaders:

• **Julius Caesar** is portrayed as having epilepsy. In the epic movie, Caesar and Cleopatra, starring Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor, Caesar expresses his fear of having an attack while he is addressing the Roman populace. The online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, says that Caesar had four documented episodes that might have represented complex partial seizures, and may have had seizures in his youth. However, other conditions have been argued, such as low blood sugar or shaking chills from malaria.

• **Alexander the Great**, who lived from 356 to 323 BC and conquered much of the known world, may have had epilepsy, but evidence is unsubstantial. He was reported to collapse once after taking a strong medicine for a respiratory ailment brought about by swimming in an icy river, but there is no definite historical record for epilepsy.

• **Czar Peter the Great**, father of modern Russia, developed a brain infection (encephalitis) at age 21 and thereafter developed seizures with twitching of his left face and left body, and sometimes loss of consciousness.

• **Charles V**, King of Austria and Holy Roman Emperor in the mid-1500's suffered from epilepsy, but reportedly even more so from gout. Another Charles, Charles II of Spain was said to be "short, lame and epileptic." Yet another Charles, King Charles II of England developed convulsive status epilepticus in 1685. The treatments he underwent included: "letting" of one pint of blood; an enema of antimony, sacred bitters, rock salt, marrow leaves, violets, beetroot, chamomile flowers, fennel seeds, linseed, cinnamon, cardamon seeds, and aloe; and having his head shaved and blistered. This concoction was not successful.

• **Prince John** was the youngest son of King George V of England around the time of World War I. Because of the prince's epilepsy, he was hidden away from the public, until dying from an epileptic seizure at age 13.

• **Napoleon Bonaparte** is said by Prof. Hughes (Epilepsy & Behavior 2003, volume 4, page 793) to have had symptomatic seizures resulting from kidney failure as well as psychogenic seizures resulting from stress.

• **Pope Pius IX**, who in the 1800's became the longest serving pontiff in history, is said by Wikipedia to have had childhood epilepsy and to have died from a heart attack resulting from a seizure.

• **Martha Parke Custis**, the step-daughter of George Washington, had uncontrolled seizures, and our first president attempted to help her control them with the valerian root, mercury, spring water and bloodletting.

• **US President James Madison** was said to have either epilepsy or psychogenic seizures, with historian R.A. Rutland (1987) reporting Madison to have monthly "high fevers, diarrhea, and seizures similar to those suffered by epileptics."

• **Vladimir Lenin**, revolutionary founder of the Soviet Union, developed seizures in his later years and died from status epilepticus recorded as lasting 50 minutes. In 1919, an assassination attempt left a bullet in his right neck. Three years later it was removed, and shortly thereafter he had three strokes which may have been the cause of his epilepsy. However, other historians argue that he had seizures for years, which were publically ignored because of his political position.

• **Senator Ted Kennedy** first manifested his brain tumor by having a seizure. Subsequently, he had others.

• **US Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts** had generalized seizures in 1993 and 2007, with no cause released to the public.
Writers and Artists: Many writers, composers and artists have been thought to have had epilepsy.

- **Dostoevsky** wrote letters speaking of his own epilepsy, which was present by time of his release from a Siberian prison, if not before. Dostoevsky instilled characters with epilepsy into at least four of his novels, and gave detailed descriptions of fictional seizures.
- Another Russian writer, **Leo Tolstoy**, had convulsions in his last months of life in 1910, as part of a terminal illness.
- Painter **Vincent van Gogh** is on poster charts for epilepsy organizations as an example of a historical figure with seizures. It is indeed likely that he had seizures, possibly resulting from consumption of potent forms of absinthe liquor (in those years containing toxins) in Paris at the end of the 19th century. He additionally had bouts of manic-depressive illness that could have been mistaken for seizures.
- The author of the novel *Mme. Bovary*, **Gustav Flaubert**, had either epileptic or psychogenic seizures.
- The poet, **Lord Byron**, had several episodes of shaking, foaming at the mouth and unresponsiveness, believed to be either epileptic or psychogenic seizures.

Actors: Several modern actors have been observed to have seizures.

- **Richard Burton** could consume multiple bottles of vodka in a day, and his seizures may have been from alcohol withdrawal. It was ironically with some personal experience that he acted having a seizure in the film Caesar and Cleopatra.
- **Bud Abbott**, the skinny straight man in the Abbott and Costello comedy team, had epileptic seizures throughout his life, and is said to have attempted to camouflage them with bouts of heavy alcohol consumption.
- **Danny Glover**, star of many movies including the Lethal Weapon series, has been public about his previous history of epilepsy. Mr. Glover says that he developed “a way of concentrating so that seizures wouldn't happen,” and he has been seizure free since age 35.
- **Hugo Weaving**, who played the leader of the Elves in Lord of the Rings, and the nearly invincible virtual villain in *The Matrix*, indicates that he has been treated for epilepsy since age 13.
- **Margot Hemingway**, actress, was the granddaughter of Ernest Hemingway and sister to Mariel Hemingway. Margot Hemingway was taking phenobarbital for lifelong epilepsy, and in possibly died from the combination of phenobarbital and alcohol.

Athletes:

- **Florence Griffith Joyner** (FloJo) was a world record setting sprinter. Possibly because of abnormal brain blood vessels called cavernous angiomas, she developed seizures and passed away during her sleep from a seizure.
- At least three NFL football stars have publically discussed their seizures. Baltimore Ravens cornerba** Samari Rolle** indicated that he missed parts of the NFL season because of epilepsy. **Jason Snelling** was diagnosed with epilepsy at age 15, but still made it to the starting lineup for the Atlanta Falcons. **Alan Faneca**, the Pittsburgh Steelers Pro Bowl guard, has had epilepsy since his teens. He does extensive volunteer work for the Epilepsy Community.
- **Chanda Gunn** was goalie in the 2006 Winter Olympics US women’s hockey team. She has had seizures since age 9, and serves as a spokesperson for epilepsy and the Epilepsy Therapy Project.
- **Bobby Jones**, was an NBA basketball player for 13 years, with four years in the All-Stars. He took medications for epilepsy during his athletic career.

Other public figures:

- **Alfred Nobel**, the inventor of dynamite, and founder of the Nobel Prize once wrote of probable childhood febrile seizures: "I scarce could muster strength to drain the breast, and the convulsions that followed, till I gasped upon the brink of nothingness." It is, however, difficult to find evidence for seizures later in his life.
- **Peter Tchaikovsky** died from cholera with convulsions at the end of the terminal illness. It has been speculated that blank periods of distraction with automatic behavior earlier in life represented partial seizures, but this cannot be proven.
- **Truman Capote**, writer of *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* and *In Cold Blood* had seizures. He was a heavy drinker and the cause may have been alcohol withdrawal.
- **Tony Coelho** is the former Democratic minority whip of the US House of Representatives. His lifelong experience with epilepsy motivated him to author the landmark legislation Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. He also served as campaign manager for Al Gore’s presidential run. Mr. Coello is the honorary life chair of the Epilepsy Foundation.
• Singer **Neil Young**, of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, thrived despite numerous medical problems, including seizures. He once had a seizure during a concert performance, but he persevered, later remarked commenting, “The aneurysm, polio, epilepsy - all those things are just part of the landscape.”

• Entertainer **Prince**, told interviewer Tavis Smiley in 2009 that he was “born epileptic” and “used to have seizures” but was cured by an angel.

• **DJ Hapa** is a famous scratch disk jockey with epilepsy. He serves as a spokesperson for the Epilepsy Therapy Project.

• **Jet Travolta**, son of John Travolta and Kelly Preston, tragically died from a seizure in 2009. Equally tragic was the death of the 6 year-old son of David Cameron, the Opposition leader in Parliament of the UK.

It is safe to say that many more famous people have epilepsy, but do not reveal it in public because of the ongoing stigma associated with the condition. What lessons can be learned from a list such as the above? Epilepsy can strike anybody at any station of life or level of accomplishment. Epilepsy can be deadly and devastating to a person's life, even if they enjoy other successes. Lastly, epilepsy does not exclude the possibility of major accomplishments and contributions.

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