

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EPILEPSY

In the Clinic
Annals of Internal Medicine

What Is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes seizures. Seizures occur when there is abnormal electrical activity in your brain cells. People with epilepsy have had 2 or more seizures or are at high risk for having repeated multiple seizures in their lifetime. The cause of epilepsy is not always known. Your risk increases if you:

- Have a family history of epilepsy
- Were born prematurely
- Had unexplained fevers as a child
- Have had infections, such as meningitis
- Have had a head injury
- Have had a stroke or a brain tumor
- Have certain rare genetic conditions

What Are the Warning Signs?

Seizures are the main symptoms. Signs can differ depending on the type of seizure. They can include changes in mental status, such as:

- Unexplained fear, sadness, or laughing
- Feeling unusual or different from normal
- Losing awareness or passing out
- Trouble responding to questions
- Feeling confused and disoriented
- Uncontrolled stiffening, jerking, or twitching
- Numbness, tingling, or pain
- Tongue biting
- Loss of bladder control

How Is It Diagnosed?

Your doctor will first need to rule out all other possible causes of your seizures. You will be asked about your medical history, your symptoms, and what happens when you have a seizure. Your doctor will then complete a physical examination. Testing may be needed, including:

- An EEG, which is a test that measures brain waves
- Imaging tests, such as an MRI
- Blood tests to rule out other causes of seizure



How Is It Treated?

Antiseizure medicines are usually used to reduce or stop seizures. It is important to take these medicines as directed. It is also important to avoid seizure “triggers,” such as lack of sleep and drug or alcohol use. If these treatments do not help with your symptoms, your doctor may refer you to a specialist to explore other options. These may include:

- An electrical device implanted in your chest to help reduce seizures
- Surgery to remove the damaged part of your brain that is causing the seizures
- Hormone medicines in women if seizures are related to hormone changes

Questions for My Doctor

- What is causing my seizures?
- How can I tell if I will have another seizure?
- What are the side effects of the medicines?
- Is it safe for me to drive?
- Can I still do the things I enjoy?
- Could my seizures cause long-term damage?
- Should I wear a medical alert bracelet?
- Are there other lifestyle changes I need to make because of my epilepsy?

For More Information



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MedlinePlus

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/epilepsy.html

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

www.ninds.nih.gov/health-information/disorders/epilepsy-and-seizures