

1 What is epilepsy?

An introduction

- Epilepsy is a common neurological condition that affects about 1 person in every 131.
- Epilepsy is a tendency to have recurrent seizures that originate in the brain.
- The brain is made up of billions of cells which process information from our senses, thoughts, emotions, memories and actions.
- Seizures are the result of a brief, temporary disruption to the usual activity of the brain.
- Such disruptions occur for a variety of reasons, not all of which can be identified.
- Reasons can include brain damage/scarring, chemical or hormonal imbalance, tumours, stroke, dementia.
- Some brains are more sensitive than others and many have a low seizure threshold, which means they are more vulnerable to seizures occurring.
- There are many types of seizures—what happens before, during and after a seizure depends on which part of the brain is affected and how far the disruption spreads.
- Most seizures are over in a few minutes or less and the person recovers quickly.
- Epilepsy can affect anyone, of any age or race, either sex and from any walk of life.
- People with frequent seizures of any type may need constant supervision.
- However, the majority of people with epilepsy respond well to treatment and can get on with their lives.

Seizure Types

There are 3 broad categories

PRIMARY GENERALISED SEIZURES

The whole brain is affected by the disruption to its usual activity and consciousness is lost. Seizures in this category include:

- **Absences**—the person looks blank for a few seconds and may not respond when spoken to or realise they have had a seizure. This type of seizure can happen repeatedly and can be mistaken for daydreaming.

PRIMARY GENERALISED SEIZURES (CONT)

- **Tonic-clonic**—the person stiffens, then jerks, loses consciousness, convulses and may fall. Incontinence may happen.
- **Tonic and Atonic** seizures, or drop attacks - the person briefly loses consciousness, may stiffen and fall heavily or lose muscle tone and crumple to the ground.
- **Myoclonic**—rhythmic muscle jerks that can affect part and/or the whole body and can be strong enough to throw the person to the ground.

PARTIAL SEIZURES

Only part of the brain is affected and consciousness may be altered but not lost. Seizures in this category include:

- **Simple partial**—the person may experience unusual sensations and/or movement in one part of the body, e.g. tingling or twitching.
- **Complex partial**—awareness is disturbed or lost and the person may experience strange feelings. They may be unaware of their surroundings, be unable to respond when spoken to and their behaviour may appear unusual.

SECONDARY GENERALISED SEIZURES

The disruption starts in one part of the brain and spreads to the whole brain.

Some seizures don't fit into any of these categories and are known as unclassified seizures. Some seizures occur as part of a syndrome—a set of symptoms occurring together.

Serial seizures and status epilepticus

In the case of tonic clonic seizures, the following situations require medical attention. **Status epilepticus is a medical emergency requiring urgent treatment.**

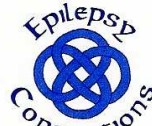
Prolonged seizures: seizures lasting over 5 minutes or 2 minutes longer than usual.

Serial seizures: seizures occurring one after another without full recovery in between.

Status epilepticus: seizure activity persisting for 30 minutes or more without return to normal breathing or full consciousness.

Prolonged seizures, serial seizures and status epilepticus can occur with **all** types of seizure and require medical attention.

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