



Epilepsy: Coping and Treatment Strategies

About 2 million Americans of all ages have epilepsy, which means they experience seizures. “Seizures are changes in the brain’s normal electric activity that can last just a few seconds or several minutes,” explains Faisal Khan, M.D., a neurologist at Memorial Hermann Sugar Land Hospital.

Having a single seizure does not mean a person has epilepsy. “A seizure also can be caused by high fever, lack of oxygen, a reaction to a strong drug or other conditions,” says Dr. Khan. Tests can determine if a person who has a seizure has epilepsy.

Causes and Symptoms of Seizures

Epilepsy can be caused by serious head injuries, infections, birth defects, inherited conditions, brain tumors, alcoholism, Alzheimer’s disease, stroke and heart attacks. But for most people, the cause of epilepsy is not known.

Some seizures are “invisible” and only cause a person with epilepsy to sense unusual tastes or smells. Other seizures can cause symptoms that are visible to others.

These include:

- Confusion
- Staring
- Losing consciousness
- Losing bladder control
- Uncontrollable body movements

Preventing Future Seizures

“For most people with epilepsy, medicines can prevent or reduce the frequency and severity of seizures,” says Dr. Khan. Eventually, some people stop having seizures and may even be instructed to quit taking medicine.

Others, though, are not helped by medicine and may need surgery or other treatment. For example, studies have shown that a high-fat, low-carbohydrate diet can help reduce the frequency of seizures.

Besides taking medicine, people with epilepsy may be able to prevent seizures by avoiding certain triggers. These include:

- Alcohol
- Cigarettes
- Unusual stress
- Flickering lights
- Not getting enough sleep

What to Do if Someone Has a Seizure

While most seizures do not harm the brain, they can still be dangerous to someone with epilepsy. This is especially true if the person blacks out or falls down.

If you see someone having a seizure, do the following:

- Cushion the person’s head.
- Try to remove anything from the area that could hurt the person.
- Do not pick up or hold down the person. Turn the person on his or her side to let any fluid in the mouth come out.
- Loosen tight clothing around the person’s neck.
- Do not put anything in the person’s mouth.
- If the person is tired when the seizure is over, help them find a place to rest and sleep.

Get medical assistance if the person:

- Has a seizure that lasts more than five or 10 minutes
- Is injured
- Has trouble breathing or has a second seizure
- Is not known to have epilepsy



Dr. Khan is a neurologist.