

fact sheet

EPILEPSY

What is epilepsy?	<p>Epilepsy is a neurological disorder that occurs when there is a brief disturbance in the normal electrical functions of the brain. In our brains, there is a constant and normal pattern of electrical communication between nerve cells. When that communication is abnormal, things get altered, such as movements, sensations, emotions, and behavior. This interruption leads to convulsions, sometimes associated with loss of consciousness. These disruptions in electrical activity are known as epileptic seizures.</p> <p>Epilepsy and associated seizures affect approximately 50 million people worldwide. In the United States, about 200,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. Some people are born with epilepsy. Other people develop it later in life as a result of injury, infections, structural abnormalities in the brain, or exposure to toxic agents. Sometimes, epilepsy and seizures occur with no known cause or underlying illness. Epilepsy is not contagious.</p>
What are the symptoms of epilepsy?	<p>Epilepsy and seizures are symptoms themselves, indicating disturbed electrical activity in the brain. There are many different types of seizures, depending on which part and how much of the brain is affected by the electrical disturbance. Generalized seizures typically affect both sides of the brain, while partial seizures only affect one side. A <i>grand mal</i> seizure usually means loss of consciousness and violent muscle contractions. A prolonged, continuous state of seizure is known as <i>status epilepticus</i>, which can be fatal.</p>
How is epilepsy diagnosed?	<p>The evaluation of patients with epilepsy is aimed at determining the type of seizures and their cause. A health care professional may evaluate the patient's medical history, including any family history of seizures, associated medical conditions and current medications and perform a complete physical and neurological examination. In many cases, the patient may receive an electroencephalogram (EEG) to detect electrical activity in the brain and other imaging or blood tests.</p>
How is epilepsy treated?	<p>The most common treatment for epilepsy is prescription medication intended to control certain types of seizures. Sometimes, more than one kind of medication is needed. It can take time for medications to work properly, so it is vital that people with epilepsy follow doctors' orders and have regular medical evaluations.</p>

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