

UNDERSTANDING EPILEPSY: A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

Epilepsy is a common condition that can affect anyone at any age. According to the WHO, 50 million people worldwide are diagnosed with epilepsy.

This article provides a clear, comprehensive overview of what epilepsy is, how we can manage it, and how people living with it can lead full and empowered lives.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a disorder of the brain. This condition causes excessive electrical activity in a brain cell. Such activity can trigger a seizure.

Seizures are involuntary movements of the body. They can look very different; some are severe, while others are very subtle. Most seizures last less than 5 minutes.

People are diagnosed with epilepsy when they have two or more seizures. There are different types of seizures; the three main groups are:

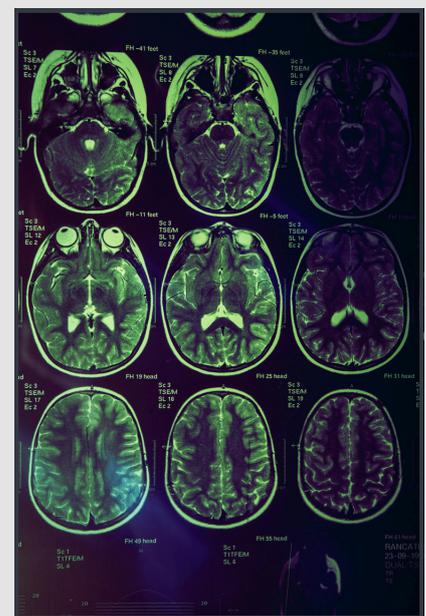
- Focal (affecting one part of the brain)
- Generalised (involving both sides of the brain)
- Unknown

What are the signs and symptoms of epilepsy?

The signs and symptoms depend on the type of seizure, the part of the brain affected and how far it spreads.

Some temporary symptoms include:

- Loss of awareness
- Disturbance of movements
- Disturbance of sensation
- Disturbance of mood
- Temporary infusion
- Loss of time awareness
- Not responding properly
- Involuntary movement of the body or body parts (arms, legs).



What can cause epilepsy?

The cause of 50% of epilepsy cases remains unknown.

The known causes are:

- Brain damage from birth problems.
- Congenital abnormalities.
- Severe head injury
- Genetic condition with associated brain malfunctions
- Brain Infections, such as meningitis and encephalitis
- Brain tumours
- Alcohol and drug abuse.

Diagnosis and treatment options:

Family history and a detailed description of the seizure and its symptoms are essential.

Diagnosis involves tests such as:

- ECG: An electroencephalogram is a test to examine the electrical activity of the brain.
- Neuroimaging: MRI, CT, SPET, and PET scans provide images of the brain.
- Neuropsychological tests assess brain function and how epilepsy affects daily life.

There is no one-size-fits-all treatment for epilepsy. 70% of people with epilepsy can become seizure-free with appropriate anti-seizure medication.

If medications are ineffective, other options include:

- Ketogenic diet therapy
- Vagus nerve stimulation
- Surgery may be necessary if seizures originate from a specific area of the brain.

Healthcare providers, including neurologists and pharmacists, play a vital role. Studies show that pharmacist-led education can improve medication adherence and seizure control by enhancing patient knowledge.



Approximately 3% to 5% of Australians will be diagnosed with epilepsy at some point in their life, and over 250,000 are living with epilepsy.

Living with epilepsy

For many, epilepsy is only part of their life, not the entire story. Daily experiences with epilepsy vary depending on the type of seizure, treatment plan, and lifestyle. With the proper knowledge and the right support, people with epilepsy can manage their condition effectively.

Simple habits can make a big difference:

- Take your medication as prescribed
- Get enough sleep (7 to 8 hours)
- Recognise and manage stress
- Avoid seizure triggers
- Track your seizures
- Exercise regularly
- Eat healthy, balanced food

Education plays a vital role in managing epilepsy. According to a 2025 study published in BMC Nursing, individuals who understand their condition and feel confident in managing it tend to have better treatment outcomes and well-being.

First aid for seizure

It is crucial to inform family, friends, school and colleagues about your epilepsy. Knowing what to do can be life-saving.

Basic first aid:

- Stay calm and time the seizure.
- Protect the person's head from injury.
- Roll the person onto their side if food, fluid, or vomit is in the mouth.
- Do not put anything in his mouth
- Do not restrain or move the person
- Call an ambulance if the seizure lasts more than 5 minutes, if another seizure follows, or if the person is injured.

Mental health and social support

The emotional side of epilepsy is just as real as the physical. Epilepsy, anxiety, and depression often coexist, with up to half of all adults with epilepsy experiencing depression at some point.

Therapy, support groups, and open conversations can help reduce stigma and increase resilience. Community involvement is crucial, and group education sessions can be empowering.

One review found that people who attended self-management groups felt less isolated, better informed, and more in control of their lives.



Final thoughts

Epilepsy is a condition, not a limitation. Epilepsy can be understood, treated, and managed. People living with epilepsy can and do live full lives with the proper support.

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