

Epilepsy Fact Sheet

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a generic term for a variety of seizure disorders. A person with recurring seizures is said to have epilepsy. A seizure is a brief disturbance in the electrical activity of the brain.

What is the difference between seizures and epilepsy?

Seizures are a **symptom** of epilepsy. They occur when a group of brain cells — which normally discharge in a chaotic or random manner — suddenly discharge together in rhythmic bursts. Epilepsy describes a state in which a group of abnormal brain cells, scar tissue, malformation, or other underlying condition makes the brain susceptible to periodic or recurring rhythmic bursts of electrical energy.

How many people does epilepsy affect?

Epilepsy is the third most common neurological disorder after stroke and Alzheimer's disease. It affects 2.3 million Americans of all ages. Approximately 181,000 new cases of seizures and epilepsy occur each year. One in every 10 Americans will experience a seizure at some point in their lives. Three percent will eventually develop epilepsy.

What causes epilepsy?

In nearly 70 percent of cases, the cause is unknown. The most common causes for the remaining 30 percent include head trauma resulting from automobile accidents, gunshot wounds and sports accidents; brain tumor and stroke; poisoning such as lead or alcohol; infection; and developmental problems before birth. Some rare forms are genetic. Epilepsy is never contagious — it is impossible to get it from or give it to someone else.

How is epilepsy treated?

Epilepsy may be treated with medications, surgery, electrical stimulation therapy, or a special diet. Medication therapy is by far the most common and is usually the first to be tried. A number of epilepsy medications are currently available. These medications control different types of seizures. A seizure-preventing medication (also known as an antiepileptic or anticonvulsant drug) won't work properly until it reaches a certain level in the blood stream and that level must be maintained. It is important to follow the doctor's instructions very carefully as to when and how much medication should be taken. The goal is to keep the blood level high enough to prevent seizures, but not so high it causes unwelcome side effects.

Approximately 500,000 Americans receive medical care that successfully controls their seizures without further complications. Approximately one million people experience inadequate relief from their seizures and/or treatment side effects. New medications with fewer side effects are desperately needed.

Where can I get additional information about epilepsy?

Contact your local Epilepsy Foundation, or call 1-800-332-1000. Or, visit the Epilepsy Foundation's Web site at www.epilepsyfoundation.org.