

# WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EPILEPSY

In the Clinic  
Annals of Internal Medicine

## What Is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes seizures. Seizures occur when there is abnormal electrical activity in your brain cells. People with epilepsy have had 2 or more seizures in their lifetime. The cause of epilepsy is not always known. Your risk increases if you:

- Have a family history of epilepsy
- Were born prematurely
- Had unexplained fevers as a child
- Have had infections, such as meningitis
- Have had a head injury

## What Are the Warning Signs?

Seizures are the main symptoms. Signs can differ depending on the type of seizure. They can include changes in mental status, such as:

- Unexplained fear, sadness, or laughing
- Feeling unusual or different from normal
- Losing awareness or passing out
- Trouble responding to questions
- Feeling confused and disoriented
- Stiffening, jerking, or twitching
- Numbness, tingling, or pain
- Tongue biting
- Loss of bladder control

## How Is It Diagnosed?

Your doctor will first need to rule out all other possible causes of your seizures. You will be asked about your medical history, your symptoms, and what happens when you have a seizure. Your doctor will then complete a physical examination. Testing may be needed, including:

- A test that measures brain waves, called an EEG
- Imaging tests, such as an MRI

## How Is It Treated?

Medicines called anticonvulsants are usually used to reduce or stop seizures. It is important to take these medicines as directed. It is also important to avoid seizure “triggers,” such as lack of sleep and drug or alcohol use. If these treatments do not help with your symptoms, your doctor may refer you to a specialist to explore other options. These may include:

- An electrical device implanted in your chest to help reduce seizures



- Surgery to remove the damaged part of your brain that is causing the seizures
- Hormone medicines in women if seizures are related to hormone changes

## Questions for My Doctor

- What is causing my seizures?
- How can I tell if I will have another seizure?
- What are the side effects of the medicines?
- Is it safe for me to drive?
- Can I still do the things I enjoy?
- Could my seizures cause long-term damage?
- Should I wear a medic alert bracelet?
- Are there other lifestyle changes I need to make because of my epilepsy?

## Bottom Line

- Epilepsy is a disorder in which too much electrical activity in the brain causes seizures. The cause of epilepsy is not always known.
- The symptoms of a seizure vary and can differ for everyone. Signs can include unexplained fear or sadness, loss of awareness, trouble responding to questions, and confusion. Physical signs can include jerking and twitching, numbness and tingling, tongue biting, passing out, or loss of bladder control.
- To diagnose epilepsy, your doctor will ask you questions about your medical history and what happens when you have a seizure. Your doctor will give you a physical examination and may run other tests.
- Medicines called anticonvulsants are used to help limit seizures. If these medicines do not help, you may be referred to a specialist to discuss other treatment options.

## For More Information



### MedlinePlus

[www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/epilepsy.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/epilepsy.html)

### National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

[www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/epilepsy/epilepsy.htm](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/epilepsy/epilepsy.htm)