

# What You Should Know About Epilepsy

## What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a disorder of the brain. In people with epilepsy, brain cells create abnormal electricity that causes seizures. A seizure may cause “jerking” movements. In some cases, seizures cause only a loss of consciousness, a period of confusion, a staring spell or muscle spasms.

A single seizure is not considered epilepsy. People with epilepsy have repeated episodes of seizures.

Epilepsy is not a mental illness, and it is not a sign of low intelligence. It is also not contagious. Between seizures, a person with epilepsy is no different from anyone else.

## What should I do when someone has a seizure?

If you have epilepsy, you may want to share the following information with your family, friends and coworkers. If someone near you has a seizure, use the following general guidelines:

- Stay calm.
- Don't try to keep the person from moving.
- Take away items that could cause injury if the person falls or bumps into them.
- Don't move the person to another place.
- Gently turn the person on his or her side so any fluid in the mouth can safely come out. Never try to force the person's mouth open or put anything in it.
- It may help you to know that most seizures aren't life-threatening. You don't need to call a doctor or an ambulance *unless* the person isn't known to have epilepsy or unless the seizure lasts longer than 10 to 15 minutes.
- When the seizure is over, watch the person for signs of confusion. Allow the person to rest or sleep if he or she wishes.

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**If I have epilepsy, do I have to take medicine every day?**

Yes. You must take your medicine every day, even when you aren't having seizures or when you think you won't have a seizure. To prevent seizures, you have to take the medicine regularly, just as your doctor tells you.

**What should I do if I forget to take my medicine?**

Usually you should take your medicine as soon as you know you forgot a dose. If more than 24 hours have passed since your last dose, ask your doctor what to do.

**Should I take extra medicine if I think I'm about to have a seizure?**

No. The amount of medicine you take is carefully set for your own needs. No extra medicine should be taken without your doctor's approval.

**Will I have to take medicine forever?**

It may be possible for some people with epilepsy to stop taking medicine. However, this decision must be made by your doctor. Before you and your doctor can decide to stop the medicine, several questions should be considered. These include how quickly your seizures were controlled, how long you have been free of seizures, and if you have other illnesses that may affect your problem.

**Can I take other drugs while taking medicine for epilepsy?**

Because many drugs affect the ability of your epilepsy medicine to control your seizures, ask your doctor or pharmacist before taking other drugs, even drugs you can buy without a prescription.

**Can I drink alcohol if I have epilepsy?**

It is probably a good idea to avoid drinking alcohol. Alcohol can make it easier to have a seizure and can also affect your epilepsy medicine. However, a little alcohol may be acceptable. Ask your doctor.

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## What if I become pregnant?

Uncontrolled seizures can affect the unborn baby. Epilepsy medicine may also affect the unborn baby. Decisions about taking medicine during pregnancy must be made by you and your doctor, after talking about the risks and the benefits.

## Can I drive if my seizures are under control?

Laws about driving for people with epilepsy are different in each state. Ask your local epilepsy foundation or ask your doctor.



### When should I call my doctor?

- Any time your seizures change, either in number or in the way you feel during them.
- Any time you are ill. Remember you may still have other illnesses along with epilepsy.
- Any time you change your seizure medicine or take any other medicines.

To learn more about epilepsy, write to the Epilepsy Foundation of America, 4351 Garden City Dr., Landover, MD 70785, or call 800-332-1000; or check the telephone book for a local epilepsy support group.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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