

# What is a Seizure? Important facts from the Comprehensive Epilepsy Center

Have you ever felt unusual? Were there times when you couldn't figure out where the time has gone or even what you have been doing? Loss of time, suspended awareness, confusion and seizures are symptoms of epilepsy. Unfortunately, many senior citizens do not realize this, because these symptoms may be thought of as physical or mental conditions that accompany aging. More than 2.5 million people in the United States are affected by epilepsy and approximately 300,000 of these are senior citizens.

## What is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a condition in which seizures recur again and again. Seizures occur when nerve cells in the brain discharge their electric current in an abnormal manner, like a "short circuit." The patient may lose consciousness, stiffen or shake all limbs. Smaller attacks may occur, with just staring spells, some other unusual behavior, or movements of one arm or leg. Epilepsy can affect anyone at any age. Statistics show that epilepsy is most likely to begin either during the first ten years of life, or after the age of sixty.

## Causes of Epilepsy

In most cases, there is no specific reason why someone begins to have seizures. It could be due to an inherited tendency towards having seizures, or a severe injury to the brain from accidents or other trauma. However, the cause of seizures in seniors are sometimes related to the physical changes associated with aging. Stroke, cardiovascular disease, brain tumors and Alzheimer's disease are all causes of epilepsy in individuals over 65.

## Types of Seizures

**Generalized Seizures:**

Generalized seizures happen when waves of electrical activity swamp the whole brain at once. These may produce convulsions, sudden falls, massive muscle jerks, or momentary blackouts.

**Partial Seizures:**

Partial seizures happen when a smaller area of the brain is affected. Partial seizures may produce uncontrollable shaking of just one arm or leg, alter emotions, or change the way things look, smell, feel, taste or sound to the person having the seizure.

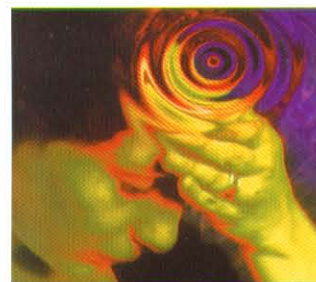
## First Aid for Seizures

- Keep calm and reassure other people nearby.
- Time the seizure with your watch.
- Clear the area around the person of anything hard or sharp.
- Loosen ties or neck wear that may make breathing difficult.
- Put something flat and soft under the head.
- Turn him/her gently onto one side. This will help keep the airway clear.
- Do not force anything into the mouth.
- Don't hold the person down or try to stop his movements.
- Don't attempt artificial respiration except in the unlikely event that a person does not start breathing.
- Stay with the person until the seizure ends naturally.

## Treating Epilepsy

There are several ways to treat epilepsy. **The Comprehensive Epilepsy Center** provides treatment with medication, ketogenic diet, epilepsy surgery and the vagus nerve stimulation. One of the most important things when treating an elderly patient is to keep track of his/her medication. Many seniors with epilepsy take more than one kind of medication. Sometimes different medications may interact with one another. If an elderly patient is seeing more than one doctor, make sure that all the doctors know about the different medications he/she is taking.

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