



Health Tips for Parents

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Epilepsy in children

Epilepsy — a disorder of the brain associated with sudden and unpredictable seizures — is the most common chronic neurological condition among children in the U.S., affecting more than 470,000 children and adolescents under the age of 18.

Understanding seizures

“A seizure is a sudden surge of electrical activity in the brain that usually affects how a person acts or appears for a period of time,” explains Jason T. Lerner, MD, UCLA pediatric neurologist. “There are many different types of epilepsy, each with different seizure types and underlying causes that can vary widely from child to child.”

Seizure symptoms can range from unresponsiveness, staring and brief loss of awareness to full-body shaking, twitching and stiffening. In general, seizures themselves do not cause permanent physical or cognitive consequences, Dr. Lerner says. Any long-term issues are usually associated with the underlying cause of epilepsy, such as genetic or brain abnormalities.

Diagnosis and treatment

An epilepsy diagnosis typically means the individual has experienced two or more unprovoked seizures, or seizures

that occurred unpredictably and not immediately after a traumatic event such as a head injury or stroke.

If your child experiences a seizure, place them on their side, do not try to stop their movements and never place anything in their mouth; contact your pediatrician immediately. Depending on your child’s symptoms and medical history, your doctor may refer you to a pediatric neurologist who will conduct a neurological history and electroencephalogram (EEG) test to see if there is any irregular electrical activity in the brain.

While there is no cure for most types of epilepsy, seizures can be prevented and controlled with anti-seizure drugs, special diets or surgery. “Certain types of seizures may even be curable,” says Dr. Lerner. “If the patient is not responding to medications and has a clearly identifiable area of the brain from which the seizures originate, we are able to remove that part of the brain and cure the seizures.”

Causes

The main causes of epilepsy in children are:

- **Genetic conditions** (juvenile myoclonic epilepsy, Dravet syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, Down syndrome)
- **Brain injury** (trauma, infection, extended lack of oxygen to the brain)
- **Brain abnormalities** (focal cortical dysplasia, hemimegalencephaly)

In some cases, a clear cause may be unknown.



Breaking down the stigma

Seizures can be frightening events for people, particularly those who are unfamiliar with the condition. Families affected by epilepsy face significant stigma, but parents and advocates can help create a more informed and understanding environment for children with epilepsy. “If you come across someone with epilepsy, or your child has a classmate with epilepsy, please show them compassion,” Dr. Lerner says. “A little empathy can go a long way.”