

General Information About Epilepsy

WHAT IS EPILEPSY?

Epilepsy is a medical problem, which happens in the brain. It causes sudden, strange behaviour called fits or seizures, or convulsions.

During this time, the brain is not in the usual contact/communication with the rest of the body. So, the person cannot control the body, or think as usual.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF EPILEPSY?

There are different types of fit/seizure.

If they are **severe**, the person will fall down, their arms and legs will jerk, and he or she will become unconscious. Sometimes this can be for a few minutes. Sometimes the person may become a bluish colour, and lose control of the bladder and bowel.

If less severe (**moderate**), the fit lasts only a few seconds or minutes. The person's arms and legs may move in a strange way.

The **mildest** type is when the person will simply just stop doing whatever he or she is doing at the time and will look into the distance for a few seconds. He or she will not know what is going on at the time.

Some people have certain types of fits only, some have several different types. The type of fit they have may change over time; for example, when they are small they have one type and as they get older they have other types.

A child may have epilepsy from a young age, or it may develop later.

WHAT CAUSES EPILEPSY?

Epilepsy is caused by damage in the brain, which is in turn caused by different things.

For many people with epilepsy, the cause of the brain damage is not known. But these are things which may be a cause:

- Sometimes it is found in people who also have Cerebral palsy, which is also caused by damage to the brain.
- Sometimes an accident causes injury to the brain (head injury), and epilepsy may be a long term problem that comes afterwards.
- Sometimes an illness such as malaria, meningitis or encephalitis leaves epilepsy as a lasting problem. The brain damage is due to the high fever, or dehydration that can come from the fever.
- Sometimes, the development of epilepsy in an older person can be a first sign of a cancer in the brain. In some cases it can be cured if the person gets the right help early on, so it is important to get good advice and treatment.



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CAN EPILEPSY BE PREVENTED?

Many times the cause of the problem is not known, so it is not possible to prevent all cases. However, it can be lessened by general things which reduce the causes of brain damage as given above:

- good care and nutrition of pregnant women, also during delivery and early life of baby
- accident prevention of head injuries
- good medical treatment for illnesses with high fever
- quick treatment if an adult suddenly develops epilepsy

CAN EPILEPSY BE CURED? DOES IT GET BETTER OR WORSE? CAN EXTRA PROBLEMS COME?

Epilepsy cannot usually be cured and is a very varying type of problem.

Most people who have it are greatly helped by medicine to control the fits. Sometimes this is needed for a few years and then the problem goes by itself. But sometimes there are people who need the medicine for their whole life.

Some children may have fewer problems as they get older, and by the time they are adults they do not have the fits any more.

Some people always have the problem.

In some cases the fits get worse, but in most people they remain the same type and length.

If someone has fitting regularly and is not given medicine to stop it, then the damage to the brain can get worse from the fits: this can in some cases also cause learning disability. If the person has a physical disability as well, this can often also be made worse by fits coming again and again.

If the epilepsy is caused by a cancer in the brain of a type which can be operated on and removed, then the epilepsy may be also cured after that.

Sometimes, the person can get another injury from something happening during the fits. For example, they could fall onto a knife and cut themselves or fall into a fire and burn themselves. This can be a very serious type of burn as the person will not be aware of the need to move out of the fire and there can be a lot of damage.

CAN OTHER PEOPLE CATCH IT? CAN IT BE PASSED ON FROM PARENTS TO CHILDREN?

Other people cannot catch epilepsy, but because the fit can be quite frightening then many people are afraid to go near the person.

It is not usual for it to be passed from parents to children but in a few cases this can happen.



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CAN THE PERSON WITH EPILEPSY GO TO SCHOOL, GET A JOB, GET MARRIED AND HAVE CHILDREN?

The child with epilepsy can go to an ordinary school. The other pupils and teachers should have training to know what to do if a fit happens.

Likewise, people with epilepsy can get jobs and do different types of work, but they should not do something that involves possible risk to others, such as driving, and they should also be careful when using knives and other sharp objects.

They can marry and have children just as anyone else. The woman should get special advice about taking epilepsy medicine in pregnancy.

HOW CAN THE DOCTOR HELP? IS IT NECESSARY TO GO TO A SPECIALIST? IS THE TREATMENT EXPENSIVE? IS EQUIPMENT NEEDED?

For someone with epilepsy it is important to get the proper medicine to reduce or stop the fits, and this should be organised by the Doctor. It is important to get the right dose, and to know how and when to change the medicine. It is especially important not to stop the medicine suddenly. It is also important to get the medicine which is the most effective and also cheap and easily available.

If epilepsy develops in an older person without an obvious cause (which would be something like a stroke or head injury), it is also important to do the proper tests and investigations to find out why. A Doctor should do this. A specialist of the brain/nerves can also help.

The medicine may be needed for a long time, so can be quite expensive. This depends on the local supply and what is available.

Special equipment is not needed.

HOW CAN A COMMUNITY DISABILITY WORKER (CDW) HELP?

The main role of the CW is to help the person, their family and community to understand about epilepsy. It is especially important for other people to know that they cannot catch it, that it is an illness, and what to do for first aid/help when the person has a fit (see on).

The CW should ensure that the person takes the medicine as the Doctor instructs.

To get a regular supply may be expensive, and the CW may need to help the family find the resources to do this.

The CW should be a counsellor and supporter to the person and his/her family, as well as helping the child to get education, and the adult some work opportunities.

HOW CAN THE FAMILY HELP?

The attitude of the family towards the person with epilepsy is very important in how the person themselves deals with it.



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The family should be positive and supportive, and encourage the person to lead as normal a life as possible. For example, for a child to go to school, and for the adult to find work and joining in community activities.

The family should not be over protective. They should all know what to do when the fits happen. They should make sure that the person gets the medicine correctly.

HOW CAN THE PERSON HELP HIM OR HERSELF?

They can help themselves by remembering to take the medicine and not taking other medicines or drink without the Doctors advice. They should take care to avoid situations which may start a fit (for some people, rapidly changing lights or TV pictures can do this). They should also not do activities that have been advised against (e.g. driving).

HOW CAN THE COMMUNITY HELP?

It is important for the community to accept the person with epilepsy just as any other person. Good awareness is needed for this, so that they understand that they cannot catch it and what to do when a fit happens.

They may be able to help in getting the necessary medicines.

The best thing they can do is to involve and include the person.

See other related modules:

- learning disability
- cerebral palsy
- burns
- head injury

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CAPTION: PROTECT, BUT DO NOT OVERPROTECT PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY

Basic First aid for epilepsy

- help the person to lie down in a safe place, on something soft (mat, clothes etc)
- especially have something soft under the head
- remove any sharp or hard objects which are nearby
- don t try to stop the movements of the person
- don t put anything in their mouth
- between the fits, lie the person on their side and check that they are breathing okay (nose and mouth clear)
- afterwards, let them rest or sleep if they want to. They may feel tired and /or confused. Give paracetamol or aspirin if they have a headache.

SEE OTHER UNIT FOR MORE DETAILS: HELPING A PERSON WHO HAS EPILEPSY



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