

Seizure types and first aid

Seizures are caused by electrical disturbances in the brain. You may have seen someone having a seizure and not even realized it. A seizure can look like many different things and have many different symptoms. About 1 of 12 people will have a seizure during their lifetime.

Anyone, whether they are young, old, healthy, or otherwise could have a seizure. There are over 20 different seizure types. A person with epilepsy (recurring seizures) may experience one kind of seizure or many different kinds. The kind of seizure a person has depends on which part and how much of the brain is affected by the electrical disturbance that produces

seizures. By knowing how to recognize seizures and what to do when you see one, you can help keep family members, friends, or even strangers safe in the face of this usually harmless event.

Most seizures end after a few moments or a few minutes. If seizures last for more than 5 minutes, or occur in a series, there is an increased risk of status epilepticus—a continuous state of seizure. This is a medical emergency and an ambulance must be called.

As in all medical situations, stay calm in order to best assess the situation and to assist the person. Using your common sense and sensitivity is essential.

Generalized seizures

Seizure type	Seizure symptoms	Post-seizure symptoms	First aid/what to do
Absence (petit mal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blank stare • Loss of awareness • Pause in activity • Possible eyelid fluttering • Begin and end abruptly • Usually last 2 to 15 seconds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No recollection of seizure • Promptly resumes activity 	Repeat what was said or provide any information that the person may have missed
Tonic-clonic (grand mal)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abrupt loss of consciousness • Falling • Stiffening of body • Jerking—affects the whole body • Shallow breathing or drooling may occur • Skin may become pale or bluish • Usually end within 3 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No recollection of seizure • Confusion • Headache • Fatigue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect head from injury • Move objects away • Gently turn on side to keep airway clear • Do not restrain • Do not put anything in the mouth (this could cause choking or break teeth) • Be friendly and reassuring as consciousness returns • Call ambulance if the seizure lasts more than 5 minutes, there is no known history of seizures, or if injured
Atonic (drop attacks)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abrupt loss of consciousness • Sudden loss of muscle tone (head drops, collapse) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No recollection of seizure • Generally quick recovery (within 1 minute) 	• Call ambulance if injuries are suspected
Myoclonic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No loss of consciousness • Rapid brief muscle contractions 	Promptly resumes activity	• Offer reassurance and assistance

health notes

Partial seizures

Seizure type	Seizure symptoms	Post-seizure symptoms	First aid/what to do
Simple partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No loss of consciousness Sensory symptoms (smell, sound, or visual distortion, or tingling), or Psychic symptoms (feelings of fear, déjà vu, or hallucinations), or Changes in muscle activity (twitching) Usually last 10 seconds to 2 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Possible short-term period of weakness or loss of sensation May progress into a tonic-clonic or complex partial seizure 	Offer reassurance and assistance
Complex partial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consciousness is impaired Often starts with a blank stare Repetitive purposeless actions, such as hand wringing, lip smacking, wandering, or nonsensical speech Movements are clumsy or disoriented Usually last 1 to 3 minutes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No recollection of seizure Confusion Fatigue May progress into a tonic-clonic seizure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speak calmly Gently guide person away from possible hazards Stay with the person until they regain full awareness Don't restrain the person unless essential for safety Offer to call a taxi, friend, or relative to help If full consciousness does not return, call an ambulance

More information

- Dozens of information sheets on epilepsy-related topics are available from the BC Epilepsy Society: www.bcepilepsy.com/publications_and_resources/information_sheets.aspx
- The BCMJ.org Health Notes information sheet Seizure in Newborns and Infants is available at www.bcmj.org/health-notes

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