

# Seizures and/or Epilepsy

Answers to common questions



Having a doctor tell you that your child has seizures and/or epilepsy may cause you to have many questions. This handout gives answers to the most common questions.

## **What is a seizure?**

A seizure occurs when there is an abnormal discharge from the brain cells called “neurons.” Depending on which neurons are involved, a child may have a loss of consciousness and jerking of arms and legs (convulsion) or may have a less obvious type of seizure such as staring spells or twitching of one side of the face.

## **What is epilepsy?**

Epilepsy is a condition where a child has recurrent seizures, or seizures that happen time after time.

## **What causes epilepsy?**

Epilepsy can occur as the result of conditions that injure the brain such as head injuries, infections, tumors or strokes. About half of the children with epilepsy have idiopathic epilepsy. This means doctors do not know what caused the seizures.

## **How is epilepsy treated?**

Doctors treat epilepsy with medicine called anticonvulsants. These medicines do not cure epilepsy. In most cases they control the seizures or make them less severe or happen less often. Different medicines work better for specific types of seizures, so your child's doctor will prescribe the medicine that works best for your child's type of seizure disorder.

Anticonvulsant medicine may have side effects. Some of these medicines can affect how your child thinks. This may be noticed most at school. Check in with your child's teacher to see if this is happening. If it becomes a problem, your child's doctor may be able to change the kind of medicine that your child takes.

Your child's doctor may need to make changes in the dose to get the best seizure control with the least amount of side effects. Blood tests are often done to find out if there is the right level of medicine in your child's body to help control the seizures. Your child's doctor will tell you how often your child will need these blood tests. Some seizure disorders get better, and some may get worse, as your child gets older. So the need for treatment with medicine will be checked again by your child's doctor as your child grows up. In certain cases, seizures that are not well controlled with medicine may be treated with surgery.

## **Are there things that can make seizures happen more often?**

There are some things that cause seizures to occur more often in *some* children. These things include being extra tired, too much stress, illness, fever, having a menstrual period or drinking alcohol.

## **Will epilepsy affect my child's ability to learn?**

Most children with epilepsy have seizures that are well controlled with medicine (anticonvulsants). Most children also have normal intelligence and attend regular classes at school.

Some children may have seizures that are harder to control or may have a brain injury that causes them to be delayed in their development. Special education classes are sometimes recommended for these children to increase or maximize their ability to learn and develop.

## **Are there activities that my child should avoid because of their epilepsy?**

- When there is good seizure control, you can encourage your child to take part in school, sports and family activities.
- When seizures are not in good control, you need to protect your child from activities that may be life threatening if a seizure should occur, such as swimming, driving a car, rope climbing, etc.

### To Learn More

- Neurology  
206-987-2078
- Ask your child's nurse or doctor
- [www.seattlechildrens.org](http://www.seattlechildrens.org)

### Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.
- For Deaf and hard of hearing callers 206-987-2280 (TTY).

- The American Medical Association advises a child with epilepsy to consider sports such as tennis or track over football or hockey.
- Your child should wear a helmet for activities such as biking, sledding, skiing, skateboarding and horseback riding. This is also true for children without epilepsy.
- A child with epilepsy should never swim alone. The "buddy system" with a buddy who is aware of the epilepsy and is willing to keep a constant eye on your child is advised. Since sometimes your child is not with a person who knows they have epilepsy, it is a good idea for a school age child to wear a medical I.D. bracelet or necklace.
- If your child has convulsions during their seizures, it's a good idea for them to take showers instead of baths.

### Should I treat my child differently now that I know they have epilepsy?

Be honest with your child about the fact that they have epilepsy. If you maintain a good attitude about your child's condition, they are likely to have a good attitude about it also.

Treat your child as normally as their abilities allow. Do not make excuses for bad behavior because your child has seizures. A child with epilepsy should follow the same rules as the rest of the family.

If your child is old enough, you can help them do more on their own by giving them a role in taking their medicine. Try using a pillbox with separate holders for each day of the week.

Do your part by promoting good sleep habits and healthy eating habits. Last, but not least, avoid being over protective. This will help your child cope well with epilepsy.