

Seizures and Epilepsy

What is a seizure?

A seizure is what happens when there is abnormal activity in brain cells (neurons). This can cause a loss of consciousness and jerking of arms and legs (convulsions). Or, this can cause a less obvious type of seizure such as staring spells or twitching of one side of the face.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is when a person has had a seizure that was not caused by fever or another known cause (unprovoked), and could have more seizures.

What causes epilepsy?

- Brain injury: Sometimes epilepsy is caused by an injury to the brain. This includes head injuries, brain tumors and strokes.
- Genetic conditions: Epilepsy can be caused by genetic changes.
- How the body processes food: Some children have problems turning their food into energy, which can cause seizures.
- Unknown causes: In many cases, doctors can't tell what is causing a child's seizures.

How is epilepsy treated?

Medicine



Doctors treat epilepsy with a type of medicine called anti-seizure medicines. These medicines do not cure epilepsy. In most cases, the medicines help control the seizures, make the seizures less severe, or make them happen less often. Different medicines work better for different types of seizures. Your child's doctor will tell you what type of seizure they think your child is having. They will prescribe the kind that works best for your child's type of seizures.

Side effects

Anti-seizure medicines can 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.

Tests to check medicine level



Doctors use blood tests to find the right amount of medicine to help control your child's seizures. Your doctor may change how much your child takes to get the best seizure control with the least amount of side effects. Your child's doctor will tell you how often your child will need blood tests. If your child needs a blood test, you will be asked to go to the lab for a blood draw. This may be on the same day as your child's neurology appointment, or a separate day and time. To help prepare your child for blood tests, visit seattlechildrens.org/photobooks.

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To Learn More

- Neurology
206-987-2078
- Ask your healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your 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.

Other treatment options

Sometimes seizures get better, and some may get worse as your child gets older. In certain cases, seizures that are not well controlled with medicine may be treated with surgery or special diets (ketogenic or modified Atkins diet).

Are there things that can make seizures happen more often?

There are some things that cause seizures to happen more often in some children. These things include:

- Being extra tired
- Too much stress
- Illness
- Fever
- Having a menstrual period
- Drinking alcohol

Will epilepsy affect my child's ability to learn?

Most children with epilepsy have good control of their seizures with medicine. Most children have typical intelligence and attend regular classes at school. Some children have seizures that are harder to control or a brain injury that causes a developmental delay. Special education classes are sometimes recommended for these children to help them learn and develop.

Are there activities that my child should avoid because of their seizures?

When there is good seizure control

Encourage your child to take part in school, sports and family activities.



When seizures are not in good control

Protect your child from activities that may be life-threatening if a seizure happened, such as swimming, driving a car or rope climbing. Talk with your child's doctor about activities that are OK for your child.



General Safety



Your child should wear a helmet for activities such as biking, sledding, skiing, skateboarding and horseback riding. This is true for all children.

It is a good idea for a school-age child to wear a medical I.D. See our handout 'Medical Alert ID' seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE2417.pdf.

Water Safety



- A child with epilepsy should never swim alone. Always have a person within arm's reach to keep a constant eye on your child, and help if they have a seizure.
- Your child should take showers instead of baths.
- For more information, read our handout “Water Safety for Children with Epilepsy or Seizures” seattlechildrens.org/pdf/ce348.pdf.

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

- Be honest with your child about their medical condition. If you maintain a good attitude about treating your child's seizures, they are likely to as well.
- Treat your child as normally as their abilities allow. Avoid making excuses for bad behavior because your child has seizures. A child with epilepsy should follow the same rules as the rest of the family.
- Try to avoid being too protective. This will help your child learn to cope with their condition.
- If your child is old enough, help them by giving them a role in their care, such as tracking and taking their medicine. Try using a pillbox with separate holders for each day of the week.
- Promote good sleep and eating habits.

Where can I learn more?

You can find more information and a helpful chart (page 8) on seizure first aid in the Epilepsy Foundation booklet “Seizure Recognition and First Aid” at epilepsynw.org/wp-content/themes/epilepsy/brochures/First-Aid-and-Seizure-Response/Seizure-Recognition-and-First-Aid.pdf.