

### Exploding the myths about epilepsy

If you or someone in your family has epilepsy you need to become seizure smart. That is: you need to know what triggers a seizure and what first-aid measures to take.

The risk of seizures in people with epilepsy may be increased because of lack of sleep, a missed dose of medication, extreme fatigue or physical exertion, emotional stress, hormone fluctuations, alcohol or drug abuse, fever associated with infections and even boredom – a lack of activity or interest.

We don't know yet all the causes of epilepsy but we do understand the mechanism which leads to the signs and symptoms.

Our bodies are complex pieces of equipment; and no part is more complex than the brain. We can compare the electrical impulses in our brain – those constantly firing brain waves – to the alternating current in our home's electricity supply. If there's a disruption in supply or perhaps a power surge, the lights may flicker, the computer goes down, or there's a blackout.

So if your brain waves are interrupted or if something triggers the electrical impulses at a greater than normal rate, a seizure might occur. If these seizures occur with some regularity, the condition is known as epilepsy.

In fact, it's important that we all understand about epilepsy. Living with epilepsy can be a challenge but for many people overcoming the problems associated with the stigma of epilepsy is more difficult than coping with the epilepsy itself.

Epilepsy is comparatively common. It affects at least 100 million people worldwide and about 2% of Australians are affected by epilepsy at some time in their lives. Well known, but not well understood; so, National Epilepsy Awareness Week which is celebrated this month sets out to address the myths and misconceptions.

The myths began many centuries ago. The Babylonians first described epilepsy as the "falling down disease" – a fairly reasonable description; but they also believed it affected people who were possessed by demons and ghosts.

During the Middle Ages, it was thought that epilepsy was a contagious disease. The ancient Greek physicians led by Hippocrates were less superstitious although they did believe epilepsy was passed on through families from one generation to the next. Of course, epilepsy is not contagious, nor is it really a disease. We now know that there are genetic causes, but there are many other causes too; and in about half the cases the actual cause is not known.

Actually, there are several types of epilepsy. In the so-called "tonic-clonic" epilepsy, which used to be known as grand mal, the person falls, goes stiff, and shakes all over. They may be unconscious for several minutes. This is probably the typical image of epilepsy.

"Absence" seizures (petit mal) are like a blank spell. The person stops what they are doing and just stares for between 5 and 30 seconds. This type of seizure occurs mainly in primary school age children. The child may have problems paying attention in class, resulting in learning difficulties.

"Complex partial" seizures are probably the most misunderstood because this form of epilepsy can be mistaken for drunkenness or drug abuse due to similar behaviour patterns. The person having one of these seizures may wander aimlessly, mumble and be glassy-eyed.

It is important to realise that epilepsy does not affect intelligence. In fact, history has shown that even without the benefit of current medications, people with epilepsy have been high achievers in their field of endeavour. Scientists Edison and Einstein, artists Van Gogh and da Vinci, writers Socrates and Dickens and musicians Handel and Tchaikovsky are all known to have had epilepsy.

Recently there have been significant advances in the treatment of epilepsy with some new medicines becoming available. These medicines, usually taken in conjunction with older preparations, can mean better control with fewer side effects.

And there is new information about epilepsy as well. The recently updated fact card on epilepsy is now available from pharmacies around Australia providing the Self Care health information. For the location of your nearest Self Care Pharmacy phone 1300 369 772 or check the website at [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au)