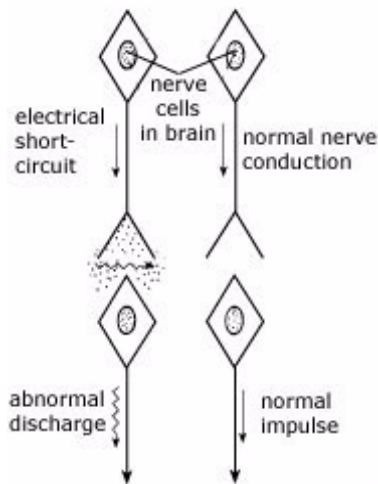


Epilepsy

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a disorder that comes in various forms and shows up as a fault somewhere in the complex electrical circuits of the brain and nervous system. This minor fault results in the brain being unable to work properly for a brief period—the various symptoms depend on what part of the brain is affected.



In epilepsy there is a fault in the 'electrical' discharge of the cells

What are the symptoms?

Some people will experience convulsions (fits or seizures) while others have unusual sensations. Some children just stare for a brief period (absence seizures) or have sudden feelings of anxiety.

The convulsion

In this type of seizure, patients suddenly become unconscious and fall to the ground. Their bodies go stiff, and then may twitch or jerk briefly. The tongue may be bitten and the bladder usually empties. They then may be drowsy or sleep for half an hour or so. Such a convulsion usually causes no problems.

Dos and don'ts for the onlooker

- *Don't* move the person (unless necessary for safety).
- *Don't* force anything into the person's mouth.
- *Don't* try to stop the fit.
- *Do* roll the person on to his or her side with the head turned to one side and chin up.
- *Do* call for medical help if the convulsion lasts longer than 10 minutes or starts again.

Note: The convulsion in itself will not cause death or brain damage.

What are the causes?

In most cases the cause is unknown and studies show that the brain appears normal in structure. However, it can be caused by damage from previous infections, scars from previous head injuries and, at times, tumours or problems relating to birth.

How common is it?

Epilepsy is common and affects about 1 person in 100. Both sexes are equally involved, and it seems to run in some families. Famous people who have had epilepsy include Julius Caesar, Agatha Christie, Thomas Edison and Handel.

What is the outlook?

Epilepsy can now be controlled to varying degrees by the careful use of medicine. Most patients can achieve complete control. Most people with epilepsy lead a normal life—they can expect to marry, have a normal sexual life and have normal children.

What about driving?

One has to be very careful about driving. However, most people with epilepsy can drive. The usual rule is that they can drive if they have not had a convulsion for a period of from 1 to 2 years.

What about employment?

People with epilepsy can hold down most jobs, but if liable to blackouts they should not work close to heavy machinery, in dangerous surroundings, at heights (such as climbing ladders) or near deep water. Careers are not available in some services, such as the police, military, aviation (pilot, traffic controller) or public transport (e.g. bus driver).

What about sport and leisure activities?

Most activities are fine, but epileptics should avoid dangerous sports such as scuba diving, hang-gliding, parachuting, rock climbing, car racing and swimming alone, especially surfing.

What is the treatment?

It is important to have medical treatment to help lead a full and normal life. Tablets or capsules should be taken regularly. Regular checkups are needed to watch for any side effects of the medicine (usually minor) and to have blood tests to check the level of the drug in the blood. Quite often, once complete control has been established for several years, the medication can be gradually withdrawn and stopped.

Avoid trigger factors such as fatigue, physical exhaustion, stress, lack of sleep and excess alcohol. You must not drive if these factors apply to you. Take special care with open fires.