



EPILEPSY



WHAT is epilepsy?

What causes it

What to do when someone has a fit

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ACCESS TO HEALTH PROJECT

EPILEPSY

by

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Epilepsy

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Contents

	page
What is epilepsy?	1
The Brain	2
What is a fit?	3
What happens during a fit?	4
What can set off a fit?	6
Who gets epilepsy?	7
Why do people have epilepsy?	8
What the doctor can do if you have epilepsy	
- EEG test	9
- CT scan, Blood test	10
Medicine	11
What to do when someone has a fit	12
Safety tips	14
Safety advice for parents who have epilepsy	15
Some other questions people ask about epilepsy	16
Useful addresses	17

EPILEPSY

People can be very worried and frightened about epilepsy.
Perhaps they don't know what is wrong.
Perhaps they don't know what to do.

This book tells you more about epilepsy:

- what it is
- who gets it
- what to do when someone has a fit.

If you need to know more, talk to your G.P,
or telephone one of the organisations on
the last page.



What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is something to do with the brain.

Something suddenly happens in the brain
which disturbs the way the brain works.



It makes the body do something unusual, for just a few
minutes or even just seconds. Doctors call it a **seizure**.

People use other words too:

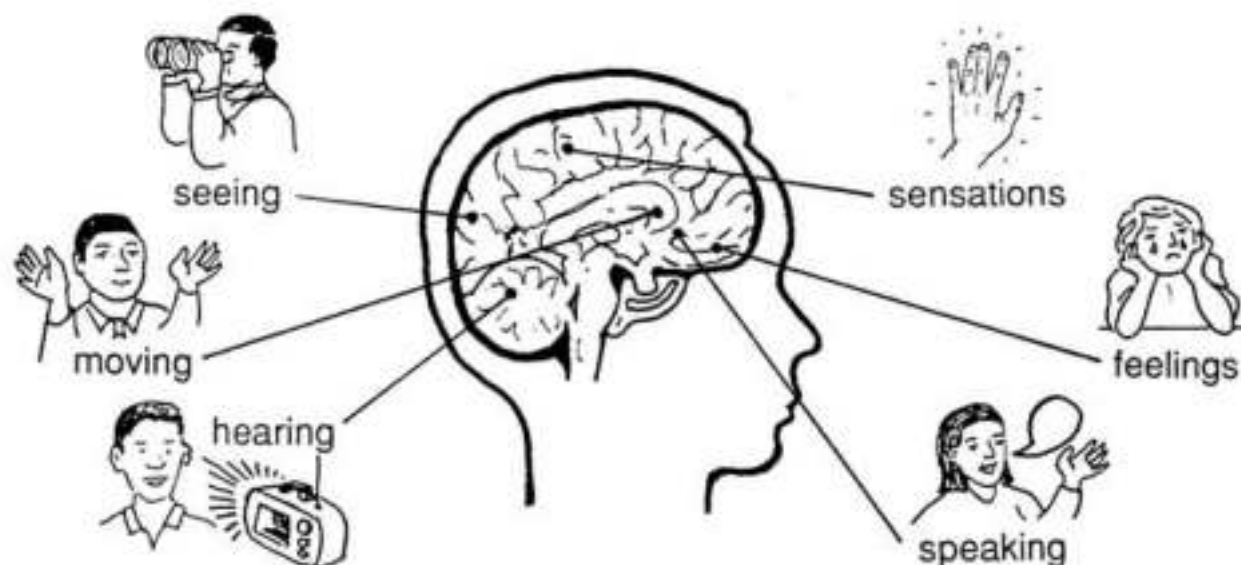
- fit
- funny turn
- blackout
- attack

There are different kinds of fit. The way one person has a fit may be
very different to someone else. But fits are all to do with the brain.

The Brain

The brain controls everything the body does. That means moving, talking, seeing, hearing, feelings, smellingeverything.

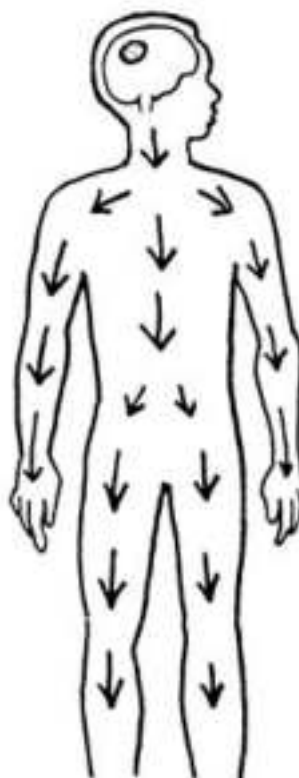
This means the brain is made up of many different parts. Each part has its own job.



The brain is connected to the rest of our body by nerves. They are a bit like telephone wires. They go to every part of the body.

When the brain decides something needs doing, it will send a message along the nerves.

The message is like some electricity going along a wire. In fact the body makes its own natural electricity to send the message.



What is a fit?

A fit is when the brain suddenly releases a lot of its natural electricity and chemicals. It may be in just one area of the brain. But it can affect the whole brain. This makes the body do something it wouldn't normally do.



Sometimes people seem to be awake while their fit is happening. But this is not true for everyone.



Some people have their fits at night while they are asleep.



Some people seem to go into a deep sleep when they have their fits, even though it is daytime. When you really cannot wake someone up, doctors say they are **unconscious**.



Some people do not know when they are going to have a fit.

But some people have a warning. It might be a sensation, a noise, a smell, feeling dizzy.



Some people know for a few days that something is building up, because they feel irritable or depressed.



What happens during a fit?



It depends on where the electricity is released in the brain. It can affect part of the brain, or all of the brain.

- Fits can affect someone's head, legs and arms. They get stiff and jerk. They may fall down. They can feel weak when the fit is over.



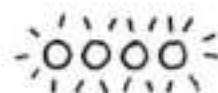
- Or someone may start feeling strange. Perhaps they suddenly feel frightened, or angry or upset.



- Some people get tingly or have a strange sensation.



- Some people see flashing lights when they have a fit.



- Some people smell a particular smell.



- Some people go blank when they have a fit. They don't seem to hear you or see you. They get confused.



- Some people wet themselves when they have a fit.



Some people do more than one thing in their fits, if the electricity is released in more than one part of the brain.

Doctors give different names to the different kinds of fits people have.

If the whole brain is affected, it is called a **generalised seizure**.



If just part of the brain is affected by the fit, it is called a **partial seizure**.



Then there are different types of each.

Usually the fit stops in a few minutes and the person wakes up.

People can be a bit sleepy and confused after a fit. They need to rest. But they probably don't need to go to hospital, unless the fit lasts a very long time.

What can set off a fit?

- flickering lights



- stressful situations

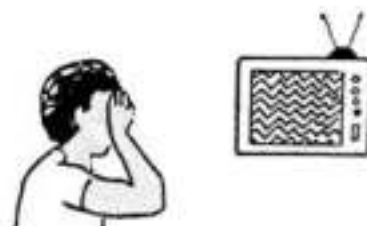


- getting upset, frightened, angry

- getting tired



- watching T.V - but this is very rare



- young women who have epilepsy may get more fits when their period is due

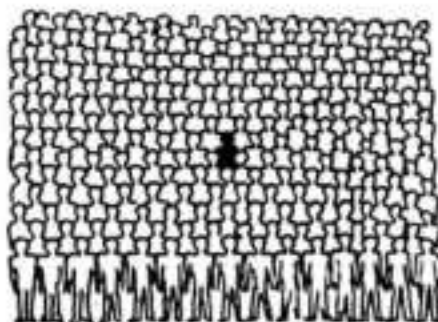


- some foods may seem to trigger a fit



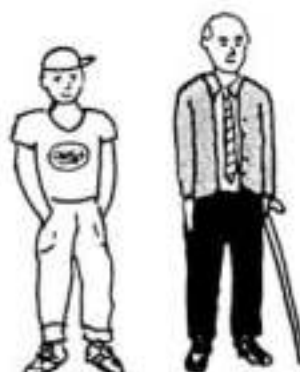
Who gets epilepsy?

Epilepsy is very common.
For every 200 people, 1 or 2
of them will have epilepsy
some time in their life.



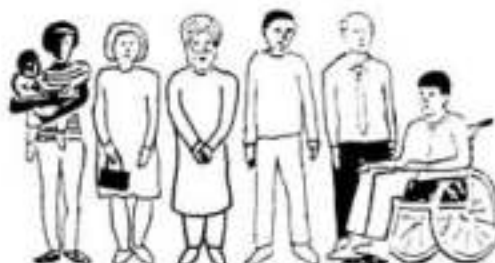
Epilepsy can happen at any time
in a person's life. It may happen
when someone is young, and then
stop when they get older.

There are more young people
(that is, up to twenty years old)
and more old people with epilepsy.



More men and boys get epilepsy
than women and girls.

There are no big differences
between people of different
ethnic origins when it comes
to epilepsy.



Why do people have epilepsy?

We know that epilepsy is about the brain.
But the brain is very complicated.

For a lot of people who have epilepsy, doctors
cannot say why it happens.

- Some people may have been born with epilepsy.



- Some people may have had something happen to them while they were being born.



- Some people may have had an illness which affected how their brain works.



- Some people may have had an accident which affected their brain.



- If the blood does not get to the brain properly, it can damage the brain. This happens more to old people. It is called a **stroke**, and this is the main reason why old people get epilepsy.



What the doctor can do if you have epilepsy

Your G.P (local doctor) will send you to see the specialist at the hospital. This doctor will ask a lot of questions about:-



- what happens before you have a fit
- what happens during a fit
- what happens after your fits.

The doctor will arrange some tests too.

1) EEG test

The doctor will send you to a clinic at the hospital to have an EEG. This is a way of recording the patterns of electricity in the brain.



HOW THEY DO AN EEG

1. At the hospital, they will ask you to lie on the bed.
2. They will stick pads to different parts of your head.
3. Then they attach wires to each of the pads.
4. The wires are connected to a computer.
5. The pattern of electricity in your brain is printed out onto paper.
6. You will have to lie very still.
7. They may ask you to breathe quickly for a few minutes.
8. They will show you flashing lights.
9. They may let you doze.

The EEG test takes about half an hour.

The EEG test helps the doctor check that you have epilepsy.

The doctor can also work out what sort of fits you have, and what sets them off. Then the doctor knows what the best treatment is for you.

2) CT scan

This is a special type of X-ray. Not everyone who has epilepsy needs to have one. A CT scan is done at a hospital clinic too. It takes pictures of the brain.



HOW THEY DO A 'CT SCAN'

1. They will ask you to lie on a bed.
2. You will have to lie very still.
3. The bed will then move very slowly back through a hole in the CT machine.

The CT scan tells the doctor more about the cause of your fits.

3) Blood test

Some people may also have a blood test. This is to see if there is any illness which might be making you have fits.



Medicine



The way that doctors treat epilepsy is with medicine.

For most people, the medicine stops their fits.

The doctor will decide which medicine is best for your type of fits.

The doctor will also work out how much medicine you need.

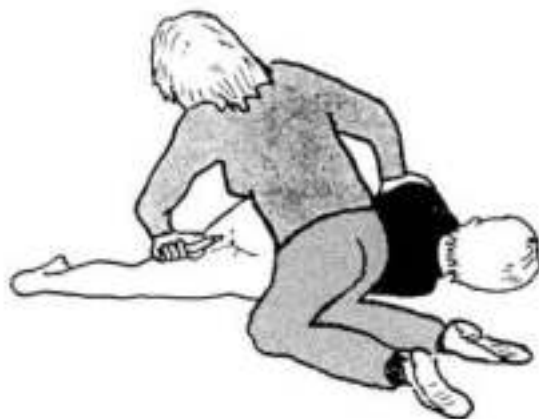
That is, enough medicine to stop your fits, without making you too dizzy, sleepy, queasy, or any other problems. You may need to see the specialist every few weeks to get this right.

When you are on the right medicine and the right amount, you need to see the doctor less often.

You will still need to go once or twice every year. They may do a blood test, to check that your medicine is still right for you.

If people have a very bad fit, they may be given a special medicine into their bottom.

This is called rectal diazepam.
It works very quickly and stops the fit.



Remember:



Take your medicine as the doctor said.

Don't stop taking the medicine, unless the doctor tells you to.

Don't change the amount of medicine you take, even if you feel well, without talking to your doctor.

If you have any problems with your medicine, tell your doctor.

What to do when someone has a fit

A fit lasts just a few minutes. It will stop by itself. You can't do anything to make it stop sooner. But here are some things that you can do to help someone who falls down when they have a fit.

1. Move things out of the way, so that they don't hurt themselves. If possible protect their head.



2. When they stop jerking, roll the person on their side. This is called the **recovery position**.



3. Put a cushion under their head.



4. Stay with the person until they feel O.K to move.





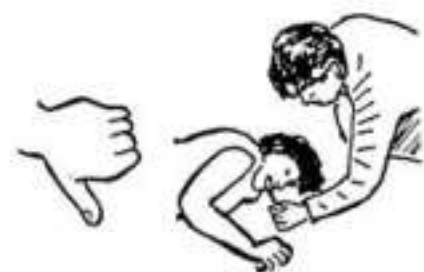
Don't try to restrain someone during a fit.



Don't drag the person while the fit is happening.



Don't move them until they are ready to move.



Don't put anything between their teeth.

If someone has one fit after another it is called **status epilepticus**. This is serious and you need to **call an ambulance**.



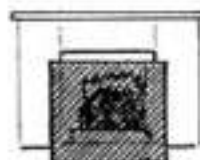
- Ring 999.
- Say clearly what the problem is.
- Tell them where to come.

Safety tips

1. Use a cooker guard.



2. Take care with saucepan handles - put them out of the way.



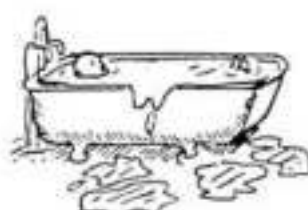
3. Put a guard round the fire.

- 4.



Don't use very hot water in the bath.

- 5.



Don't fill the bath too deep or have a shower instead.

6. Make sure someone is in the house when you have your bath.



7. Take someone with you when you go swimming. Let the lifeguard know you have epilepsy.



8. Wear a bracelet or a necklace or carry an information card. This says who you are, and who to contact if you have a fit in the street. (See the useful addresses on page 17).



Safety advice for parents who have epilepsy



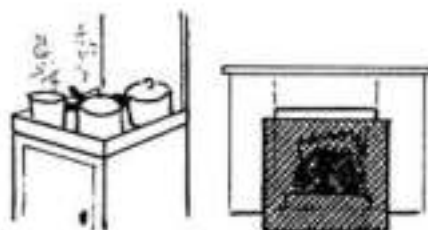
1. Keep your medicines out of reach of your children.



2. Be careful not to get too tired, if that makes you have fits.



3. Use a cooker guard, and a fireguard.



4. Change the baby's nappy on the floor.



5. A playpen is useful.

6. Wash the baby with a wet sponge, not in the bath, unless someone is around.

Some other questions people ask about epilepsy.

Will epilepsy make my learning difficulties worse?

No, not unless you have a lot of fits, one after the other (status epilepticus). This is more of a problem for children. If fits go on for more than twenty minutes, then this can be dangerous.



What if I have children?

There is some risk that your children will have epilepsy. For every 40 children born, 1 will have epilepsy. The risk is greater if both parents have epilepsy.



Does epilepsy make people violent?

No. But people may seem to lash out during a fit. Afterwards they may be confused and need to rest.



Do I always have to take medicine?

It depends. Some people may be able to stop their medicine, if their fits stop for two or three years. You must talk about it with your doctor first.



Useful Addresses



British Epilepsy Association
40 Hanover Square
Leeds LS3 1BE
0113 243 9393

British Epilepsy Association Northern Ireland
The Old Postgraduate Medical Centre
Belfast City Hospital
Lisburn Road
Belfast BT9 7AB
01232 799 355

Epilepsy Association of Scotland
48 Govan Road
Glasgow G51 1JR
0141 427 4911

National Society for Epilepsy
Chesham Lane
Chalfont St Peter
Bucks.
SL9 0RJ
01494 601 300

Epilepsy Helpline
0345 089599

Personal safety aids
Medic-Alert Foundation
11/13 Clifton Terrace
London N4 3JP
0171 833 3034

SOS Talisman
212-220 Regents Park Road
London N3 3HP

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