Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center

PATIENT & CAREGIVER EDUCATION

Understanding Seizures

This information answers some common questions about seizures, including what to do if you or someone else has a seizure. The first section is for you and the second part is for your family and friends.

Having a seizure or watching someone have one can be very scary. For some people, it can also be embarrassing. Knowing what to do can help you keep from getting hurt and may make it easier after the seizure. If others know how to help, they can also help keep you from getting hurt.

Information for You

What is a seizure?

A seizure is sudden, uncontrolled change in your brain electrical activity. It can happen at any time and can change how you feel, act, or sense things. There are different types of seizures based on the area of your brain affected.

Partial seizures affect one area of your brain. Symptoms of a partial seizure include:

- Jerking or stiffening on one side of your body.
- Changes to any of your 5 senses (sensation, hearing, vision, smell, or taste).
- A feeling of *déjà vu*, which is feeling like what's happening has happened before. You can have this with or without loss of awareness.

Generalized seizures affect a larger area or more than one area of your brain. Symptoms of a generalized seizure include:

- A loss of consciousness, which can make you forget that you had a seizure.
- Not being able to speak.
- Jerking motions of your arms and legs, which can cause you to fall.
- Making too much saliva, causing you to drool.
- Losing control of your urinary or bowel functions.

What causes seizures?

Some possible causes include:

- A brain tumor or cancer that has spread to your brain
- An injury or infection in your brain
- A stroke

- An electrolyte imbalance (when the levels of minerals in your body are too high or too low)
- Substance abuse or withdrawal (physical and mental symptoms after you stop smoking)
- A high fever
- Withdrawal from antiseizure medication

Sometimes, the cause of seizures is unknown.

Will I know when I'm going to have a seizure?

Some people can tell what triggers (causes) their seizures or can sense when one is about to start. This is called an aura. During an aura, you may have:

- Changes in your sense of smell or taste
- A feeling of warmth or tingling
- Visual changes, such as seeing a flashing light
- Ringing in your ears

What happens after a seizure?

With some types of seizures, you may feel like nothing happened. Others may require that you get some rest. You may feel confused, feel tired, have muscle weakness, or have problems speaking. This is called the postictal state.

Call your healthcare provider to tell them that you had a seizure, especially if it's your first time having one.

What are some common medications to control seizures?

Your healthcare provider will order medication(s) to help control your seizures. Your nurse will talk with you about the possible side effects of these medication(s) and how to manage them. Examples of medications that your healthcare provider may prescribe include:

- Carbamazepine (Tegretol®)
- Clobazam (Onfi®)
- Divalproex sodium (Depakote®)
- Gabapentin (Neurontin®)
- Eslicarbazepine (Aptiom®)
- Lamotrigine (Lamictal®)
- Lacosamide (Vimpat®)
- Levetiracetam (Keppra®)
- Oxcarbazepine (Trileptal®)
- Phenobarbital (Luminal®)
- Phenytoin (Dilantin®)
- Topiramate (Topamax®)
- Zonisamide (Zonegran®)

What should I know about taking medication(s) to prevent seizures?

- Take your seizure medication(s) as prescribed. If you forget a dose, take it, unless it's almost time for your next dose. If it's time for your next dose, skip the dose you missed and keep your regular schedule. Don't double your dose or take extra medication.
- Don't stop taking your medication(s) unless your healthcare provider tells you to stop, even if you haven't had a seizure or if you feel better.
- Some over-the-counter (medication you get without a prescription) and prescribed medications may interact with seizure medications or make it more likely for you to have a seizure. It's important for you to tell your healthcare provider about all medications you're taking.
- Some herbal remedies and supplements can lower your seizure threshold (make you more likely to have a seizure) or change the blood level of your seizure medications. Discuss any herbal remedies or supplements that you're taking with your healthcare provider.
- If you're a female, discuss contraception (birth control) with your healthcare provider. Some seizure medications may make your oral contraceptives (birth

control pill) less effective.

- Call your healthcare provider if you have any questions or concerns.
- Keep all appointments with your healthcare providers.

What can I do to keep myself safe?

- Ask your healthcare provider if you should have a MedicAlert® bracelet. This will let people know that you have a seizure condition if you're unconscious or unable to speak.
- Discuss driving limitations with your healthcare provider and know the driving laws of your state.
- Be aware of water safety.
  - Never swim without a lifeguard.
  - Take showers instead of baths.
- Don't climb ladders or work at high heights.
- Make sure you use safety equipment, such as helmets and life jackets, during recreational activities. Speak with your healthcare provider about your activities.

Information for Friends and Family

Share this information with your family and friends so they know what to do if you have a seizure.

What should I do if my loved one has a seizure?

- Keep calm.
- Keep them away from anything dangerous, such as sharp objects.
- Turn them on their side.
- Put something soft under their head and loosen any tight clothing.
- Note how long the seizure lasts, if you can.
- Note what the seizure looks like so you can describe it to the healthcare provider or paramedics.
- Stay with them until the seizure is over.
- Notify their healthcare provider.

What should I not do during a seizure?

- Don’t try to stop the seizure or use any restraint, such as holding them down.
- Don’t put anything in their mouth.
- Don’t let them eat or drink anything until they’re fully awake and alert.

When should I call emergency medical services (911)?

- If it's your loved one's first seizure.
- If the seizure lasts more than 5 minutes.
- If your loved one has difficulty breathing, is hurt, or seems sick.
- If your loved one has another seizure right away.

If you have questions or concerns, contact your healthcare provider. A member of your care team will answer Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Outside those hours, you can leave a message or talk with another MSK provider. There is always a doctor or nurse on call. If you're not sure how to reach your healthcare provider, call 212-639-2000.

For more resources, visit www.mskcc.org/pe to search our virtual library.

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