

Epilepsy Information Sheet

A seizure occurs when nerve cells in the brain act abnormally. Epilepsy is a medical condition that produces seizures affecting a variety of mental and physical functions. Two or more unprovoked seizures diagnose a person with epilepsy.

Doctors classify seizures based on the location of the abnormal brain activity.

- Focal (partial) seizures appear to result from abnormal activity in just one area of the brain.
- Simple focal seizures may alter emotions or change the way things look, smell, feel, taste or sound. They may also result in involuntary jerking of a body part, such as an arm or leg, and sensory symptoms such as tingling, dizziness and flashing lights. They do not result in loss of consciousness.
- Dyscognitive focal seizures alter consciousness or awareness and may cause a person to lose awareness for a period. They often result in staring and purposeless movements, such as hand rubbing, chewing, swallowing or walking in circles. Dyscognitive seizures produce impairment(s) in perception, attention, emotion, memory or executive function (Dyscognitive Seizures, 2013).

Generalized seizures seem to involve all areas of the brain.

- Absence seizures, also called petit mal seizures, present as staring and subtle body movement. These seizures can cause a brief loss of awareness.
- Myoclonic seizures usually appear as sudden brief jerks or twitches of the arms and legs.
- Atonic seizures, also known as drop seizures, result in a loss of muscle control, which may cause the student to suddenly collapse or fall down.
- Tonic seizures cause stiffening of the muscles, usually those in the back, arms and legs. The seizure may cause the student to fall to the ground.
- Clonic seizures are associated with rhythmic, jerking muscle movements. These seizures usually affect the neck, face and arms.
- Tonic-clonic seizures, also called grand mal seizures, include loss of consciousness and stiffening and shaking of the body. There may be loss of bladder control or biting the tongue.

Symptoms

In most cases, a person with epilepsy will tend to have the same type of seizure each time, so the symptoms will be similar from episode to episode. They may include staring, temporary confusion, loss of consciousness or awareness and/or uncontrollable jerking movements of the arms and legs.

Educational Implications

Seizures, medications and clinic visits may increase absences from school. Medication side effects include delayed response and inconsistent performance.

Some students may have memory storage and retrieval issues, processing delays, and difficulty with comprehension and abstract reasoning.

Some students have difficulty concentrating and are distractible, impulsive and disorganized.

Some students become lethargic and tired.

There may be reduced visual and motor functioning and changes in personality and relationships.

Educational Options

Those students whose epilepsy adversely affects their educational performance may benefit from special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). To qualify under IDEA, a student must meet eligibility criteria in one of thirteen specific disability categories. IDEA entitles a student with a disability to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) and an individualized education program, including individual goals, objectives, related services, accommodations and modifications.

Students that do not qualify for services under IDEA may qualify under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. To qualify under Section 504, a student must have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (for example learning, breathing, thinking, concentrating, walking, bodily functions). Under Section 504, a student is entitled to equal opportunity, and may qualify for a Section 504 plan that provides regular or special education and related aids and services.

A student with a health condition who does not require special instruction and related services can receive, as appropriate, a wide range of supports in the general education classroom, including accommodations, individualized health plans (IHP), emergency care plans (ECP) and local education agency supports.