

Types of Seizures

A guide to identifying eight of the most common

Generalized tonic—clonic (also called grand mal)—Starts with a sudden cry, fall and rigidity, followed by muscle jerks (convulsions), shallow breathing, bluish skin, possible loss of bladder or bowel control. Usually lasts a couple of minutes, then normal breathing resumes. There may be some confusion and/or fatigue, followed by return to full consciousness.

Absence (also called petit mal)—Most common in children, absence seizures start with a blank stare lasting only a few seconds. May be accompanied by rapid blinking, chewing movements of the mouth. The person who has the seizure often is unaware of what's happening during the event, but is fully aware once it ends. May result in learning difficulties if not recognized and treated.

Simple partial—Jerking typically begins in one area of the body (arm, leg or face) and can't be stopped, but the person remains awake and aware. Jerking may proceed from one area of the body to another, and sometimes spreads to become a convulsive seizure.

Partial sensory—These may not be obvious to an onlooker. The person experiences a distorted environment; may see or hear things that aren't there or feel unexplained fear, sadness, anger or joy. May have nausea, experience odd smells and have a general "funny" feeling in the stomach.

Complex partial—Typically starts with a blank stare, followed by chewing, then random activity. Person appears unaware of surroundings, is unresponsive and may seem dazed. Actions are clumsy and not directed. May pick at clothing, pick up objects, try to remove clothes. May run or appear afraid. May struggle or flail at restraint. Once pattern is established, the same set of actions usually occurs with each seizure. Seizures last a few minutes, but post-seizure confusion may last substantially longer. No memory of what happened during the seizure period.

Atonic—The person suddenly collapses and falls. After 10 seconds to a minute, he or she recovers, regains consciousness and can stand and walk again.

Myoclonic—Sudden brief, massive muscle jerks may involve the whole body or parts of the body. May cause person to spill what they were holding or fall off a chair.

Infantile spasms—These are clusters of quick, sudden movements that start between 3 months and 2 years. If the child is sitting up, the head will fall forward and the arms will flex forward. If lying down, the knees will be drawn up, with arms and head flexed forward as if the baby is reaching for support.

Source: Epilepsy Foundation of Eastern Pennsylvania—efepa.org



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