

# did you know...?

This factsheet lists some interesting facts about epilepsy. If you would like to know more about epilepsy, visit our website or call our helpline (see second page for details).

- Epilepsy is a neurological condition – which means it affects the brain. It is also a physical condition, because the body is affected when someone has a seizure.
- Epilepsy is defined as the tendency to have seizures that start in the brain. Epilepsy is usually only diagnosed after the person has had more than one seizure.
- The Greek philosopher Hippocrates (460 – 377 BC) was the first person to think that epilepsy starts in the brain.
- Anyone can have a seizure if the circumstances are ‘right’, but most people do not have seizures under ‘normal conditions’.
- Seizures are sometimes called ‘fits’ or ‘attacks’. Seizures happen when there is a sudden interruption in the way the brain normally works. In between seizures the brain functions normally.
- Epilepsy is a variable condition that affects different people in different ways.
- There are over 40 different types of seizure. What seizures look like can vary. For example, someone may go ‘blank’ for a couple of seconds, they may wander around and be quite confused, or they may fall to the ground and shake (convulse). So not all seizures involve convulsions.
- Some people are unconscious during their seizures and so they do not remember what happens to them. It can be really useful to have a description of what happened from someone who saw their seizure to help with diagnosis. This is sometimes called an ‘eyewitness account’.
- Different epilepsies are due to many different underlying causes. The causes can be complex, and sometimes hard to identify. A person may start having seizures due to a brain injury, or there may be a genetic tendency.
- Epilepsy can start at any age, but it is most commonly diagnosed in people under 20 and people over 65. This is because some causes are more common in young people (such as difficulties at their birth, childhood infections or accidents) and in older people (such as strokes that lead to epilepsy). For some people their epilepsy might ‘go away’ and they stop having seizures. This is called spontaneous remission.
- Epilepsy can be difficult to diagnose and there are a number of different tests that might be done to help with a diagnosis, such as an EEG (Electroencephalogram) or an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan.
- Epilepsy is usually treated with medication called anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). AEDs aim to stop seizures from happening, but they do not cure epilepsy.
- With the right AEDs, up to 70% of people with epilepsy could have their seizures controlled (stopped).



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- The first AED used to treat epilepsy was phenobarbitone in 1912. There are now around 26 different AEDs available in the UK.
- For people who do not have their seizures controlled with AEDs, surgery may be an option. This can involve removing the part of their brain that causes the seizures.
- Some people may have a form of treatment called Vagus Nerve Stimulation (VNS) therapy to help control their epilepsy. This involves having a special device implanted in their chest that sends regular electrical signals to their brain through the vagus nerve in their neck.
- St Valentine is the patron saint of people with epilepsy.
- Some famous people who have had epilepsy include Roman Emperor Julius Caesar and the artist Vincent Van Gogh. More recently the actor Danny Glover, Rabbi Lionel Blue and rugby player Dean Ryan.
- People with epilepsy are protected under the Equality Act 2010, a law that aims to protect people against several different types of discrimination.
- 1 in 50 people will have epilepsy at some time in their life (not everyone with epilepsy will have it for life).
- 1 in 20 people will have a one-off seizure at some point in their life (although this does not necessarily mean they have epilepsy).
- Around 87 people are diagnosed with epilepsy every day in the UK.
- There are over 500,000 people in the UK who have epilepsy. That's about one in every 100 people. There are over 60 million people with epilepsy in the world.
- Up to 3% of people with epilepsy will be affected by flashing lights (called photosensitive epilepsy), so most people with epilepsy do not have seizures triggered by flashing lights.

## when to call an ambulance

Usually when someone has an epileptic seizure there is no need to call for an ambulance.

**However, you should always call 999 for an ambulance if:**

- it is the person's first seizure;
- they have injured themselves badly;
- they have trouble breathing after the seizure has stopped;
- one seizure immediately follows another with no recovery in between;
- the seizure lasts **two minutes longer** than is usual for them (if you know how long their seizures usually last); or
- the seizure lasts for more than **five minutes**.

 See our leaflet *first aid* and our factsheet *the recovery position* or visit [epilepsysociety.org.uk/recovery-position-video](http://epilepsysociety.org.uk/recovery-position-video).

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[www.epilepsysociety.org.uk](http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk)



helpline

01494 601 400

Monday and Tuesday 9am to 4pm

Wednesday 9am to 7.30pm.

Confidential (national call rate)