What is epilepsy?
Epilepsy is a neurological condition that affects the brain and nervous system. It is characterised by the tendency to have repeated seizures that start in the brain. Anyone can develop epilepsy: it happens in all ages, races and social classes. There are many different types of seizures, and their effects may differ from one person to another.

If you spend time with someone with epilepsy, for example if they are in your class or you are assessing the potential impact of their seizures and the support they may need, it is important to know about their seizures. It is also useful to know how to recognise their seizures and know what to do to best help them.

Knowing how to help someone during and after an epileptic seizure may help you feel more confident if a seizure happens.

The following information gives general guidance about how to help someone during a seizure, depending on the type of seizure and what is happening to the person. Having more details from the person themselves, such as what specifically happens during a seizure, how they feel afterwards and what they would like you to do, helps you to best help them.

How to help during a focal seizure
In a simple focal seizure the person is conscious (awake) and aware of what is happening to them. The seizure could be twitching of one limb or part of a limb, an unusual smell or taste, a strange feeling such as a ‘rising’ sensation in the stomach or ‘pins and needles’ in part of the body, or a sudden intense feeling of fear or joy.

• Although they are awake and aware, the seizure can feel unsettling so gentle reassurance may be helpful.

In a complex focal seizure the person’s consciousness is affected and they may be confused. You might notice them wandering around or behaving strangely and they may not know what they are doing. They may pick objects up for no reason, fiddle with their clothes or make chewing movements with their mouth. Afterwards, they may need to sleep or they might be confused for some time.

• Do not restrain the person as this may upset or confuse them. Gently guide them away from any danger (such as walking into the road) and speak quietly and calmly so that they are not startled. They may be confused, so if you speak loudly or act forcefully this may confuse them more. They may mistake your help for being hostile, and be upset or respond in an aggressive way.

• After the seizure, they may feel tired and need to sleep and it may help if you remind them where they are because they may be confused and not fully aware of their surroundings. It is a good idea to stay with them until they have recovered and can safely return to what they were doing before the seizure.

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How to help during a secondarily generalised seizure
If a focal seizure develops into a generalised seizure (a secondarily generalised seizure) the person will become unconscious and will usually have a tonic clonic seizure.

- If the person is aware of a warning, they may need help to make themselves safe before the generalised seizure starts.

Generalised seizures
In a generalised seizure the person usually becomes unconscious, and afterwards will not remember what happened during the seizure.

How to help during an absence
If the person becomes blank and unresponsive for a few seconds, and is not aware of what they are doing or what is happening around them.

- Stay with them to keep them safe. If necessary, gently guide them away from any danger, for example, if they are walking they may continue to walk, but will not be aware of what they are doing.

How to help during tonic and atonic seizures
If the person’s muscles suddenly become stiff (tonic seizures) they are likely to suddenly fall backwards. Although they are likely to recover quickly, injuries are common.

- As the seizure is sudden and brief, you cannot help during the seizure itself. Afterwards, it may be helpful to reassure them, and to check whether they have been injured and need medical help.

If the person’s muscles suddenly lose tone (atonic seizures) they are likely to suddenly fall forwards. Although they are likely to recover quickly, injuries are common.

- As the seizure is sudden and brief, you cannot help during the seizure itself. Afterwards, it may be helpful to reassure them, and to check whether they have been injured and need medical help.

How to help during myoclonic seizures
Myoclonic seizures are brief jerks of a limb or part of a limb, and often happen shortly after waking up from sleep. They can happen in clusters with many happening close together in time.

- As they are so brief, there is nothing that needs to be done to help the person other than making sure they haven’t hurt themselves.

How to help during convulsive seizures
In convulsive seizures the person may suddenly go stiff and fall to the ground (a tonic clonic seizure). However, sometimes the person will not stiffen at the start of the seizure (clonic seizure). Then the person shakes or makes jerking movements (convulses). Their breathing can be affected and they may go pale or blue, particularly around their mouth. They may also bite their tongue. Although this can be frightening to see, these seizures are not usually a medical emergency. Usually, once the jerking has stopped, the person recovers and their breathing goes back to normal.

During the seizure:
- try to stay calm;
- check the time to see how long the seizure is going on for (because there may be a risk of status);
- move objects, such as furniture, away from the person if they might hurt themselves;
- only move them if they are in a dangerous place; for example, at the top of stairs or in the road;
• put something soft (like a jumper) under their head, or cup their head in your hands, to stop it hitting the ground;
• **do not** restrain them, allow the seizure to happen;
• **do not** put anything in their mouth – there is no danger of them swallowing their tongue during the seizure; and
• try to stop other people from crowding around.

When the jerking (convulsing) has stopped:
• roll them on to their side into the recovery position (see right);
• wipe away any spit and if their breathing is difficult check their mouth to check nothing is blocking their airway, such as food;
• try to minimise embarrassment. If they have wet themselves, deal with this as privately as possible; and
• stay with them, giving reassurance, until they have fully recovered.

Some people recover quickly from a tonic clonic seizure but more often they will be very tired, want to sleep and may not feel ‘back to normal’ for several hours or sometimes days.

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**Usually when a person has an epileptic seizure there is no need to call an ambulance. However you should always dial 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; or
• the seizure lasts more than five minutes and you do not know how long their seizures usually last.