

Kept under wraps

Misconceptions mean people are reluctant to talk about the condition

EPILEPSY

Epilepsy is the second most common neurological condition in the UK. Only migraines affect more people, yet most of us know very little about the condition. Many people – either in the public eye or passing you on the street – are reluctant to tell people that they have epilepsy because misconceptions surrounding the condition make people embarrassed about – and the more people know about epilepsy the less they will fear it.

Epilepsy facts

Roughly one in 131 people in the UK lives with epilepsy, that's approximately 456,000 of us. It is a very complex condition that can affect anyone from any walk of life. Some people develop epilepsy as a result of some kind of brain trauma (although sometimes it can take years to develop), whereas sometimes there seems to be no cause at all. Sometimes people can develop epilepsy late in their lives, whereas others are born with it and may even grow out of it.

Epilepsy is described as a tendency to have recurring seizures. A seizure occurs when the electrical signals in the brain go wrong – sometimes firing off all at once and becoming mixed up. There are around 40 different types of seizures that can be recognised in different ways and one person can have more than one seizure type (see box).

MAIN TYPES OF EPILEPSY

- ◆ **Partial seizures.** A person's level of consciousness will not be affected by a simple partial seizure. They will often experience changes in sensation, such as strange tastes or smells, or a feeling of déjà vu. A person experiencing a complex partial seizure will find their consciousness is impaired, often appearing very confused.
- ◆ **Absence seizures.** This type involves losing awareness for several seconds and can happen several times every day. These seizures are sometimes accompanied by smacking lips or fluttering eyelids, although often there can be no outward sign that a person is having them.
- ◆ **Tonic-clonic seizures.** These seizures are the type that most people would recognise. A person having a tonic-clonic seizure will suddenly go stiff, falling to the floor. This is followed by contraction of the muscles, resulting in the body jerking. A tonic-clonic seizure will usually be over quickly, although an ambulance should be called if a seizure lasts longer than five minutes.

What to do

Tonic-clonic seizures may be the most dangerous type. This is partly because if a person falls they may be injured. Seizures can

also reach status epilepticus. This is when the seizure lasts longer than 30 minutes, does not stop on its own and may require medical intervention. Tonic-clonic seizures that lead to status epilepticus are particularly dangerous and will mean a medical emergency.

If you encounter someone having a tonic-clonic seizure (see left), follow these guidelines:

Do

- ◆ protect the person from injury – remove harmful objects from nearby
- ◆ cushion their head
- ◆ look for an epilepsy identity card or identity jewellery
- ◆ Aid breathing by gently placing them in the recovery position once the seizure has finished
- ◆ be calmly reassuring
- ◆ stay with the person until recovery is complete.

Don't

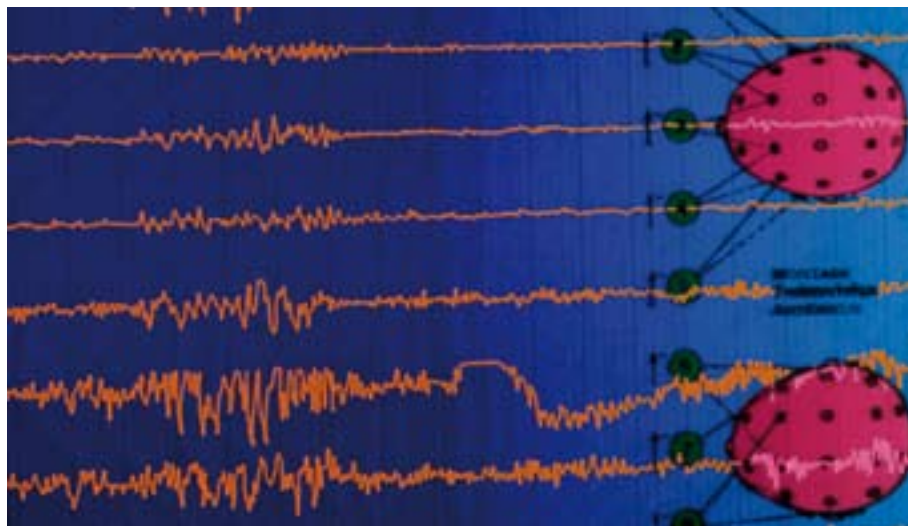
- ◆ restrain the person
- ◆ put anything in the person's mouth
- ◆ try to move the person unless they are in danger
- ◆ give the person anything to eat or drink until they are fully recovered
- ◆ attempt to bring them round.

Call an ambulance if

- ◆ you know it is the person's first seizure
- ◆ the seizure continues for more than five minutes
- ◆ one tonic-clonic seizure follows another without the person regaining consciousness between seizures
- ◆ the person is injured during the seizure
- ◆ you believe the person needs urgent medical attention.

→ Epilepsy Action is a member-based charity that provides information and support to people with epilepsy, along with their friends, family members, carers and health professionals. It produces a range of booklets and factsheets. Several are available in different languages including Braille. The organisation runs an Epilepsy Helpline, offering free, confidential advice and information. The helpline can be accessed by emailing helpline@epilepsy.org.uk or by calling freephone 0808 800 5050.

Visit the organisation's website for more information on epilepsy and a broad range of related services at www.epilepsy.org.uk



Coloured electroencephalogram of an epileptic seizure. The orange traces show electrical activity in the brain. The sudden onset of the attack is shown here by the abrupt increase in activity on the traces.