

## Glossary: Words related to epilepsy

*To make this book easier to read, we used simple and clear words as often as we could. Still, the words used to talk about epilepsy can be difficult to understand. This glossary contains definitions of medical words related to epilepsy that are used in this book and in other resources on epilepsy.*

**Absence seizure.** A seizure that causes a brief loss of awareness or alertness. The person's body does not move, but they may look like they are zoned out or staring into space. Afterwards, they usually do not remember what happened and will resume doing whatever they were doing before the seizure.

**Antiseizure medicine.** Medicines prescribed to people with epilepsy to prevent seizures or reduce their frequency. Taken daily, they may stop seizures from happening but do not cure epilepsy.

**Atonic seizure.** A type of generalized seizure that causes a person to briefly lose muscle tone. Part or all of a person's body goes limp, and the person may slump or fall. Also called a "drop attack."

**Aura.** Sensation or feeling in the body or mind before or at the beginning of a seizure, such as a strange smell, taste, feeling, or change in vision or hearing. Aura is a warning sign that a seizure is starting.

**Automatisms.** Repetitive, involuntary movements during a seizure, such as picking at clothing, lip-smacking, or eye blinking.

**Complex partial seizure.** A seizure that starts in a single area of the brain and causes temporary loss of consciousness, confusion, and altered awareness. Person may stare or make repetitive movements. Also called "focal impaired awareness" seizure.

**Consciousness.** The state of being awake, alert, and aware of oneself and the environment, involving the ability to perceive, respond, and remember what happened. When a seizure affects consciousness, a person may seem confused, unresponsive, or "not there." Afterward, they may have little or no memory of the seizure.

**Convulsions.** Uncontrolled, repeated, and often jerking body movements that are common to many seizures.

**Cysts.** Fluid-filled bumps that form in or on the body. In neurocysticercosis, cysts containing tapeworm larvae can form in the brain and trigger seizures.

**Drug-resistant epilepsy.** When epilepsy's seizures are not controlled after trying at least two different antiseizure medicines. Also called "intractable" or "refractory" epilepsy.

**EEG (electroencephalogram).** A medical test that records the brain's electrical activity to a computer using electrodes (small discs) placed on a person's scalp. Often used to diagnose epilepsy and other brain conditions.

**Emergency medicine (or rescue medicine).**

Used to stop a seizure that lasts longer than 5 minutes (status epilepticus), which is a medical emergency. Some emergency medicines are also used as daily antiseizure medicines.

**Encephalitis.** Inflammation of the brain, usually caused by an infection.

**Epilepsy.** A brain condition that causes a person to have seizures repeatedly. Not all seizures are epilepsy, but a main feature of the condition is that seizures happen again and again.

**Epileptologist.** A health worker, usually a doctor, with extensive training to diagnose and treat epilepsy and seizures.

**Etiology.** The cause of a disease or health problem—what started it or led to it happening.

**Fever (or febrile) seizure.** A seizure in a child between 3 months and 6 years of age triggered by a fever above 38.3°C (101°F) from sore throat, ear infection, bad cold, or other cause. Treated with medicines to lower fever as well as to treat the cause of the fever.

**Focal seizure.** A seizure in one part of the brain that causes movements or sensations on only one side of the body. Sometimes it spreads to the whole brain and becomes a generalized seizure.

**Generalized seizure.** A seizure on both sides of the brain that affects both sides of the body. Can begin as generalized or develop when a focal seizure spreads to involve the entire brain.

**Generalized tonic-clonic seizure.** A seizure on both sides of the brain and body that causes sudden loss of consciousness, falls, stiffening (tonic phase), and jerking movements (clonic phase). Also called “grand mal” seizure or tonic-clonic seizure.

**Genetic.** Genes are the instructions inside our cells that guide how our bodies grow and work. Genetic characteristics and changes can be inherited, caused by the environment, or happen randomly.

**Hereditary.** Passing of genetic information (genes) from a parent to their child.

**Idiopathic.** When a disease or disorder has no known cause.

**Infantile spasms.** Seizures in babies and very young children that occur in short spasms (1 to 2 seconds), causing sudden stiffening or bending of a baby’s arms, legs, or head.

**Ketogenic (or “keto”) diet.** A high fat, low carbohydrate diet in which the body gets energy from burning fat instead of glucose (sugar). Carefully planned to meet a person’s nutritional needs, a keto diet can sometimes treat seizures not well-controlled by medicine.

**Lobes (frontal, temporal, occipital, parietal).** These four lobes in the brain are associated with different functions: frontal (decision-making, problem-solving, speech, personality, behavior, emotion, movement), temporal (memory, hearing, language, learning), occipital (vision, face and object recognition, depth and distance perception), and parietal (sensations).

**Myoclonic seizure.** A generalized seizure that causes brief, shock-like jerks of a group of muscles.

**Nervous system.** The body's communication network, made up of the brain, spinal cord, and nerves, that sends and receives messages that control movement, thinking, feeling, and body functions.

**Neurologist.** A doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of brain and nervous system disorders, including epilepsy.

**Neurons.** Cells in the nervous system that send and receive messages between the brain and the rest of the body, allowing a person to move, feel, think, and breathe.

**Paroxysmal.** The sudden, uncontrolled, and intense onset of symptoms rather than a gradual worsening. Describes seizures that start and stop suddenly rather than gradually building or fading.

**Psychogenic non-epileptic seizure.** A seizure from psychological causes, such as stress, anxiety, or trauma. These seizures look like but are not epilepsy. Also called PNES, non-epileptic seizures, functional dissociative seizures, or conversion disorder.

**Seizure.** A sudden, uncontrolled, temporary disturbance to the brain's electrical activity.

**Simple partial seizure.** A brief seizure that occurs in a single part of the brain without causing a loss of consciousness or awareness. It can involve symptoms such as involuntary jerking, sensory changes (tingling, flashing lights), or emotional changes (*déjà vu*, fear). Also called "focal aware" seizure.

**Status epilepticus.** Multiple seizures with little or no recovery time between them. If a seizure lasts longer than 5 minutes, a person is in status epilepticus, a medical emergency.

**Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy (SUDEP).** When a person with epilepsy dies suddenly without a known or identifiable cause. SUDEP can affect people with all seizure types but occurs more commonly with tonic-clonic seizures.

**Syndromes, Epilepsy syndromes.** A grouping of signs, symptoms, and seizure types that usually begin around a certain age or set of conditions. More than 30 different syndromes affect children and adolescents, including Dravet syndrome, Lennox-Gastaut syndrome, and West syndrome.

**Trauma.** An emotional or physical injury. Physical trauma to the brain can cause epilepsy. Emotional trauma, caused by a terrible event experienced currently or in the past, can cause psychogenic non-epileptic seizures.

**Trigger, Seizure trigger.** An event or situation that causes or increases the likelihood of a seizure for a person. Triggers may include heat, flashing lights, sleep deprivation, stress, hunger, thirst, etc.