

Epilepsy and Your Child: What is it?

The body has its own electrical communication system called the nervous system.

Nerves carry information all over the body to and from the brain.

The brain and nerves help the body do what it does including how we think, breathe, move, and how our heart beats.

Epilepsy is a long-term problem with the nervous system that causes repeated seizures.

Seizures happen when one or more parts of the brain has a burst of abnormal electrical signals that disturb normal brain signals.

Seizures may cause problems with muscle control, movement, speech, vision, or awareness.

They usually don't last very long, but they can be scary.

“I was 12 years old, and I was sitting in the back of the babysitter's car with my younger sister. We were kind of just joking around, laughing, having conversations, and all of a sudden I had this feeling like my head tilted back and I tried to move it back down, but it was stuck. I was unable to move. So all I could see was what was above me and all of a sudden I was just blacked out.”

Epilepsy affects each child differently. Some children have only a few seizures. Others get them more often.

There are two types of seizures: generalized and focal. Understanding the types of seizures that your child has is key to the best treatment.

Generalized seizures begin over the entire surface of the brain and may involve the whole body.

Focal seizures (sometimes called partial seizures) occur when the abnormal electrical signals happen on one side of the brain. Focal seizures may disturb awareness and can affect one muscle group in your child's body. They may look awake but are behaving in an unusual way such as laughing, crying, screaming, or running.

“There are a few definitions. I think the most common that people know is that it is a seizure disorder. So there are different types of seizures and, not any one type of epilepsy diagnosis is the same. And I think that was the hardest part for us to learn.”

Epilepsy is treatable. Your child will take medicines to control and reduce seizures.

You and your doctor will work together to find the right combination, schedule, and dose of medicine that is best for your child.

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Helping your child maintain a regular sleep schedule and helping your child manage stress can also help reduce or prevent the chance of a seizure.

And you can find ways to help keep your child as safe as possible while having a seizure including creating a seizure action plan and sharing it with all caregivers.

Now, it's important to know that epilepsy does not cause and is not a form of mental illness.

Children with epilepsy may have a hard time performing in school.

Some seizures may explain why a child seems to "zone out" or not pay attention during class.

And some medicines used to control seizures may affect a child's ability to stay focused at school.

"With her homework. She takes notes for studying, and then she rewrites them so she can help transfer that information and to long term, rather than keeping it in the short term."

It's normal to be afraid or worry about seizures. It can help to learn all you can about epilepsy and the types of seizures your child has.

It's also important to have people in your life who can give you support.

"So reach out to the people around you. Because not only will that help you, but it will help educate others about what this condition is and how it can not only affect you, but also them."

There are epilepsy support groups who meet to give support, practical advice, and encouragement to the people who participate in the group.

But it's also important to help your child live, play, and learn like other children.

You know your child best, so if you have questions or concerns about epilepsy you can always talk to your healthcare team.