

## There are many types of seizures....

Did you know that people who have epilepsy can experience a number of different types of seizures? Often when we think of a seizure we think of someone falling to the ground and convulsing for several minutes. But remember that seizures can affect not only a person's body movements but can change the way a person senses the world or the way a person feels.

Seizures are generally classified by whether they involve the entire brain (e.g. generalized seizures) or a portion of the brain (e.g. partial seizures).

**Partial seizures** are further subdivided into simple-partial seizures and **Focal Dyscognitive Seizures** (also called complex-partial seizure).

A **simple-partial seizure** is one in which a person is conscious during the seizure and a **Focal Dyscognitive Seizure** (complex-partial seizure) is one in which a person is unconscious during a seizure. A person having a simple-partial seizure can tell you he/she is having a seizure and can ask and answer questions. For example, a person having a simple partial seizure may tell you that he/she smells something odd, like sulphur.

A person who is having a **Focal Dyscognitive Seizure** (complex-partial seizure) cannot tell you that he/she is having a seizure and cannot ask or answer questions. These seizures are more difficult than simple-partial seizures to identify because someone having a complex-partial seizure may seem aware; he/she may make vocalizations (these may or may not be words/sentences or vague mumblings), his/her eyes will most likely be open (but the person will probably have a "blank" stare), and he/she may walk about (but without purpose and with no sense of safety/danger). For example, a person having a complex-partial seizure might stop in the middle of a sentence, stare blankly, start to mumble quietly, and walk around the room.

Unlike partial seizures, **primarily generalized seizures** involve the entire brain. For this reason, a general seizure will also involve the whole body.

A tonic-clonic seizure (previously called grand mal) is a general seizure and is the type of seizure most people think of. When a person has a tonic-clonic seizure, his/her muscles will stiffen (usually causing him/her to fall to the floor) and then the muscles will start to jerk. Another common general seizure (especially in children) is an absence seizure. During an absence seizure (formerly known as petit mal), a person will "check out" for a few seconds; the person will have a blank stare (sometimes with fluttering of the eyelids) and will be unresponsive (e.g. he/she won't talk). When a person has a myoclonic seizure, he/she experiences an involuntary jerking of all the limbs. A tonic seizure causes all a person's limbs to temporarily stiffen (however the limbs don't jerk as they do in a tonic-clonic seizure). Finally, atonic seizures cause temporary loss of muscle tone so that a person falls (usually muscle tone is lost from the head down so that the person falls on their head).

Someone can have either primarily or secondarily generalized seizures. A person is said to have **secondarily generalized seizures** when his/her seizure begins as a partial (usually a simple-partial) seizure and becomes a general seizure. It is common that a person may not realize they are having a simple partial seizure; usually, a person will describe “auras” or warnings that let them know they are about to have a general seizure. These “auras” are actually simple partial seizures that start in one part of the brain (for example, in the part of the brain responsible for smell) and recruit more and more of the brain until the whole brain is involved in a general seizure (for example, a tonic-clonic seizure). For example, you may hear a person say that he/she smells sulphur and, after a few seconds, that person has a tonic-clonic seizure.

**Here are some tips that may help you recognize when a person is having a seizure:**

- Seizures usually start very suddenly; a person usually engages in normal behavior until just before the seizure begins and then that normal behavior stops suddenly.
- A seizure may begin with a blank stare or cry. A person having a tonic-clonic seizure will usually fall to the floor.
- A person may be unresponsive throughout a seizure and stare blankly or fail to answer when addressed.
- Seizures usually end as suddenly as they begin and this may be easy to see when someone is having a tonic-clonic seizure. However, sometimes a person is slow to regain awareness and may be confused or not realize that they had a seizure for a few minutes after it ended. If you are not sure if a person has had a seizure but they appear to be confused all of a sudden, this is a good indicator that they did, in fact, have a seizure.
- Because a person who has a generalized seizure usually loses muscle control, either due to muscle stiffness or due to loss of muscle tone, he/she may become incontinent and this is also a sign that he/she is having a seizure.
- If unusual behavior follows any of these common environmental triggers, the behavior is likely a seizure: bright/fluorescent lights, loud noises, chemical smells, or emotional stress.

Epilepsy is a common chronic condition in which people experience seizures. Seizures can affect all or part of the brain and may or may not impair consciousness. [Click here](#) for a fantastic infographic capturing how to manage epilepsy and seizures.

Or [click here](#) to listen to an audio version of Q&A's for epilepsy and seizures.

For more information, you can contact Lindsay Beal, Epilepsy Program Coordinator at (250) 475-6677 or [email](#).

*Now that you know a little bit about seizures and epilepsy,  
why not learn about [seizure first-aid?](#)*