

CLUW News Health Tip

EPILEPSY

Epilepsy is a health condition that is often misunderstood. More than two million people have it. Usually the cause is unknown, although head injuries and some illnesses can cause it. In people with epilepsy, the normal electrical activity of the brain is briefly interrupted when too many nerve cells fire at once. This results in a seizure and there are more than 20 different types. A person having a seizure might have a short blackout period or fainting spell, stare blankly for a few seconds, experience brief jerking of their arm or face, or have involuntary blinking or chewing movements. The most severe form is a tonic-clonic seizure or convulsion (formerly called a grand-mal seizure). When this happens, the person will lose consciousness and fall. Their whole body will stiffen and then their muscles will jerk uncontrollably for a few moments.

If you witness a person experiencing a convulsion, you cannot stop it, but you can help the person. Ease her into a reclining position on the floor or a flat surface. Place something soft under her head. Turn her gently to one side to prevent choking. Do NOT force anything into her mouth. Do not restrain her movements but keep objects away from her to avoid injury. When the seizure is over, let the person rest. Call 911 if this is the person's first known seizure, if it lasts more than five minutes, or if it is followed by more seizures.

About equal numbers of males and females have epilepsy, but managing the condition in women is different. Estrogen and progesterone may affect a woman's seizures. As hormone levels go up and down, seizure patterns may change. Women with epilepsy may have problems with their menstrual cycles and fertility. Some anti-seizure drugs may reduce the effectiveness of birth control pills. Medication is highly effective in controlling epilepsy in the majority of people, but about 30 percent of persons who take it may still have some seizures. Usually, seizures are less severe when medication is taken daily.

Persons with epilepsy should be able to lead full, normal lives. Most are able to drive as long as their condition is controlled with medication. They have the same job protections as persons with any other health condition, such as diabetes or heart disease. The more knowledgeable we become about it, the more we can help our colleagues overcome any fears they may have of letting others know they have this condition. For more information contact the Epilepsy Foundation of America at www.efa.org.

Helen Ramirez-Odell