

# EPILEPSY FACT SHEET

## Seniors and Epilepsy

(Adapted from “Seizures & Seniors” by the Epilepsy Foundation of America)

Sometimes symptoms of epilepsy, in persons over 65, are dismissed as the mental or physical problems associated with aging. These temporary and periodic symptoms of seizure activity could include:

- convulsions
- loss of awareness or consciousness, possibly experienced by the individual as “lost time”
- confusion
- unexplained changes in emotional state
- a change in the way things look, feel, taste, smell, or sound
- inappropriate behaviours or actions

It is important to check with your physician about these symptoms. It may be epilepsy and in many cases seizures can be controlled by medication.

### Causes of Epilepsy

Epilepsy can occur at any age when disease or injury cause sufficient stress to the brain. For seniors the most common causes of epilepsy are:

- stroke
- heart attack
- degenerative brain disease, such as Alzheimer’s Disease
- complications from other diseases, such as diabetes
- brain tumors
- brain surgery

### Anticonvulsant Medication

Anticonvulsant medication can prevent or reduce seizure frequency. However, the level of medication must be built up and maintained at an optimum level in order for it to be effective. Therefore, **it is extremely important to take medication regularly as prescribed by your physician. Never stop taking epilepsy medication without consulting your doctor.** Sudden lowering of drug levels can result in a potentially life-threatening condition known as **status epilepticus**.

## Other Symptoms

If older persons with epilepsy display **unusual depression, confusion, or memory problems** it may be related to their medication for the following reasons:

- *drug interaction* ▲ other medications may negatively interact with epilepsy medication. Therefore, it is important to advise your physician of all medications being taken.
- *toxicity* ▲ older persons are slower to process and eliminate drugs from their systems. This could result in levels of medication becoming too high.
- *sensitivity* ▲ older persons may be more sensitive to the depressive aspects of some drugs.

If any of above symptoms are present, alert your physician so medication can be checked as a possible cause and adjusted if necessary.

## When Do Seizures Require Medical Attention?

Seizures are rarely life-threatening. They are usually short in duration and end naturally on their own. Therefore, medical assistance is generally not necessary. However, there are some warning signs, especially with seniors, that require immediate medical attention:

- if a seizure **lasts longer than 5 minutes** or if second seizure follows after the first without recovery in between ▲ **CALL 911 for an AMBULANCE**
- if the person is experiencing an **unusual amount of pain after seizure** it may be an indication of secondary injury, such as broken bone ▲ **CALL DOCTOR**
- headaches are common after a seizure, but **if headache is severe** ▲ **CALL DOCTOR**
- if period of confusion after seizure lasts longer than one hour ▲ **CALL DOCTOR**

For general guidelines on how to assist with a seizure see **First Aid for Seizures** fact sheet available from the Epilepsy Association of Calgary.

## For Further Information Contact:

Physician or Healthcare Provider

### The Epilepsy Association of Calgary

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