

Epilepsy in dogs

What is epilepsy?

A neurological disorder marked by sudden recurrent episodes of sensory disturbances, loss of consciousness with abnormal electrical activity in the brain.

What happens during a seizure?

During a seizure, there are bursts of electrical activity in your brain, sort of like an electrical storm. This activity causes different symptoms depending on the type of seizure and what part of the brain is involved. Seizures can take on many different forms and can affect different animals in different ways.

It can be very frightening the first time you witness a dog seizuring. It is important to stay calm. There is individual variation between dogs but commonly a generalised seizure proceeds as follows:

- Loss of consciousness- they cannot hear or respond to you
- Stiffening, falling onto their side and will make running/paddling/ jerking movements with their legs
- Involuntary defecation or urination
- Drooling
- Chomping or tongue chewing
- Foaming at mouth
- Most seizures last between 1-3minutes.
- After a seizure they will appear dazed and confused, they may walk into things or circle and sometimes hide. They may be very thirsty and/or hungry. This can last for up to 24 hours, although often is only 10-15minutes.

Some dogs seem to know when they are about to have a seizure and may behave in a certain way, often seeking out their owner's company.

What should I do while my dog is having a seizure?

Stay calm. Your dog is unconscious and is not in pain or distress during a seizure. Ensure your dog is in a safe area where it will not injure itself, free of objects and not near the top of stairs for example. Other than this do not try and interfere with your dog. Never put your hand inside their mouth. They will not swallow their tongue and you will likely get bitten. Try to note the duration of the seizure- it will always feel like longer than it is. This information is very useful for the vet and if possible a video. If the seizure lasts for longer than a few minutes, then there is a risk of your dog overheating. If it is more than 5 minutes please call the vet. Quickly place a fan near or wrap cold cloths around their paws.

What causes a seizure?

There are several different causes of a seizure. They can be classified as Intracranial (in the brain) and Extracranial (outside of the brain). Idiopathic epilepsy is diagnosed through the exclusion of all other causes. It is important to rule out underlying conditions as a satisfactory treatment can only be achieved if a correct diagnosis has been made.

Your vet will perform a thorough clinical examination of your animal. They will then carry out a blood test and further tests may be needed to look for an underlying cause. An MRI (brain scan) may be recommended at a referral centre and a spinal fluid sample may be taken by a specialist neurologist following this. Often these tests come back as normal which means your animal has “Idiopathic” Epilepsy (no underlying cause found). These animals have their first seizure typically between 6 months- 6 years old and they are completely healthy and normal in all other respects.

What treatment is available?

There is no cure for Idiopathic Epilepsy.

Idiopathic epilepsy varies greatly in the severity and the frequency of the seizures; from very few a year, to several a week and from a mild twitch or head nodding to generalised tonic clonic seizures. However, the seizures can be controlled with the frequency, duration and severity being reduced to a manageable level enabling your dog to lead a happy and healthy life.

Anticonvulsant drugs are used and selected according to the individual. Regular monitoring by your vet will be required. Please ensure you give the medication regularly and never adjust the dose or suddenly stop without consulting your vet first. Your dog will not be worrying about when their next seizure is going to strike he will be enjoying one day at a time, and as long as the good times outweigh the bad you can feel happy to do the same.