

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMITATORS OF SEIZURES

While many medical conditions can be confused for epilepsy, the most difficult to differentiate are those that mimic the psychological aspects of a seizure.

Some conditions affect the mind in a way that produces symptoms similar to seizures and can provide real diagnostic difficulties for doctors. One such psychological imitator, called the breath-holding spell, is a variant of a temper tantrum that occurs in childhood. A breath-holding spell occurs when a child becomes angry and holds his or her breath until loss of consciousness. This can be followed by jerking. The symptoms are similar to certain kinds of seizures.



A night terror is another common condition that mimics epilepsy. It is seen most often among children aged 2 to 6. During the night terror, children will let out blood-curdling screams during sleep. The children rarely remember the episodes, but the parents do. While the breath-holding spells and night terrors can be frightening, they are generally benign, and not epilepsy.

On occasion, panic and anxiety can lead to episodes that mimic seizures. With anxiety can come hyperventilating, which is essentially breathing fast at a rate in excess of what the body needs. Excessive breathing may lead to low levels of carbon dioxide in the blood. This causes dizziness, numbness and confusion and may appear similar to symptoms of seizures. Hyperventilating may be the result of pain, anxiety or a panic attack.



A panic attack is a very abrupt period of intense anxiety and physiological arousal, including rapid heart rate, dizziness and nausea. There can sometimes be a sense of impending doom. Once diagnosed, panic attacks can generally be controlled with a combination of medication and psychological care.

One especially confusing psychological imitator of epilepsy is called a psychogenic nonepileptic seizure or PNES. A PNES is a seizure-like event that is caused by psychological factors. Generally, the person experiencing a PNES is not aware of these factors and cannot control them. PNES's do not come from electrical discharges of the brain, as do epileptic seizures.

PNES's can be diagnosed and treated. For more information on PNES's, please check out the other videos in this series.