

Generalized seizures, which involve a widespread electrical discharge across both sides of the brain, come in a variety of forms. Let's look at some common types.



Generalized seizures are characterized by synchronous electrical activity throughout the brain. But each type of generalized seizure has a different effect on people. Here's a typical story from the parent of someone who gets tonic-clonic seizures, which were once called grand mal seizures: "These seizures only last a minute or two but it seems like forever. It begins with an unnatural shriek and she falls and every muscle seems to be activated. Her teeth clench. Shortly after she falls, her arms and upper body start jerking while her legs remains stiff. Finally it stops and she falls fast asleep".

A tonic-clonic seizure is what most people think of when they hear the word "seizure." Although these seizures are distressing to watch, the person having them is unaware. We don't believe that the seizures are painful, but people can injure themselves by biting their tongue or straining their muscles. The tonic or stiffening phase comes first. All the muscles stiffen. Air being forced past the vocal cords causes a cry or a groan. The person loses consciousness and falls down. The tongue or cheek may be bitten, so blood or saliva may emerge from the mouth. The person may turn blue in the face.

After the tonic phase, comes the clonic or jerking phase. The arms or legs jerk rapidly, bending and relaxing. After a few minutes, the jerking slows and stops. Bladder or bowel control sometimes is lost as the body relaxes, leading to incontinence. Consciousness returns slowly and the person may be drowsy, confused, agitated or depressed. Sometimes, seizures don't have tonic stiffening and clonic jerking sequences, but are tonic only or clonic only.

UNDERSTANDING GENERALIZED SEIZURES

Absence seizures used to be called petit mal seizures. Here's a typical story: Frank, a young man, often blanks out for up to 20 seconds at a time. During a seizure, Frank doesn't seem to hear anyone. He blinks repetitively and his eyes roll up a bit. During shorter seizures, he just stares. Then he continues, as if nothing happened. Some days, Frank has over 50 of these spells. Absence seizures usually begin between ages 4 and 14. They can resemble episodes of daydreaming. If they go on for more than 30 seconds or if there is a lot of movement, then the seizure is called an atypical absence, which is harder to treat.

Here's a story from someone who gets myoclonic seizures: "Each morning, I get these jumps. My arms fly up for a second and I often drop what I am holding. Sometimes, my mouth shut for a split second. Once I am up for a few hours, the jumps stop." Myoclonic seizures usually last only a second or two. It can be just one jerk or a series of several. Consciousness may be lost, but seizures usually are so brief that it is hard to tell.



Here's a typical story from someone whose husband has atonic seizures: "When Bob has a drop seizure, he falls to the ground and often hits his head and bruises himself. Even if I'm right next to him and prepared, I may not catch him." A sudden loss of muscle tone during an atonic seizure can cause the head to drop suddenly, objects to fall from the hands or the legs to lose strength. This type of seizure is also called an akinetic seizure or an epileptic drop attack.

If you have or think you may have one of these types of epileptic seizures, please see a doctor.