

Glossary of terms often used

Epilepsy is a complex condition. It is not surprising that the jargon used in the field of epilepsy can be complex as well.

Terminology is sometimes replaced, for example “grand mal” and “petit mal” are used infrequently these days. We have put together a list of words that we are commonly asked about, and what they mean. For more specific, detailed definitions and descriptions, we suggest that you speak with your doctor, do some reading or give us a call.

Absence seizure

A type of generalised seizure, previously known as “petit mal”. These seizures typically are a very brief lapse of consciousness, so brief that they may go unnoticed, and are characterised by staring.

Atonic seizure

Also a type of generalised seizure sometimes referred to as a “drop attack”. There is a sudden loss of muscle tone that may cause falling.

Aura

Is a focal seizure where the person can feel and remember the experience.

Automatism

Is a repetitive, automatic movement during or after seizures – e.g fiddling with clothes, or repeated swallowing.

Cognitive

To do with the thinking processes. Includes memory, problem solving etc.

Complex partial seizure

An old term for a focal seizure that occurs

in part of the brain and impairs consciousness.

CT Scan

CT stands for computed tomography. X-rays and computers create pictures of the brain. CT Scans are often used when epilepsy is being considered and investigated for the first time.

Convulsion

Older term for seizure (especially of the tonic clonic variety).

Dialeptic

A seizure characterised by impaired awareness of, interaction with or memory of ongoing events.

Dyscognitive

A state where awareness is not maintained throughout an episode.

EEG

Abbreviated term for electro - encephalogram. It involves being “wired” up with electrodes (we’ve heard kids call it the funny hat test), and measures the brain’s electrical activity. It is a very important diagnostic tool for epilepsy.

Fit

Another older term for seizure.

Focal seizure

These seizures occur when the seizure activity occurs in only part of the brain.

Generalised seizure

Where the seizure activity affects the whole brain. Common generalised

seizures include tonic clonic seizures and absence seizures.

Ictal

The period during a seizure. (Interictal - the time between seizures, Postictal - the time immediately after a seizure).

Infantile spasms

A type of seizure (characterised by brief, sudden flexion of the head, trunk and limbs) found in infancy and early childhood.

Ketogenic diet

A high fat diet sometimes used to control seizures.

MAD Modified Atkins Diet sometimes used to control difficult to control seizures.

MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging)

A scanning technique which uses a strong magnet rather than x-rays. It gives a picture with clearer definition than a CT Scan, but is more difficult to get than a CT Scan in some areas of Queensland.

Myoclonic seizure

Involves a brief, sudden jerk - usually symmetric, of the muscles in the upper limbs and body.

Photosensitive epilepsy

A type of reflex epilepsy where light, particularly flashing lights (eg. strobes) may cause seizures. Only a small percentage of people with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy.

Pseudoseizures (or psychogenic seizures)

Seizures which are psychological in their origin, but this is not to say that they are brought on consciously. Video EEG monitoring is of assistance in identifying seizures of this kind.

Reflex epilepsy

When seizures are triggered by sensory stimuli (as is the case with photosensitive epilepsy).

Seizure

A temporary sudden change in the electrical and chemical activity in the brain which causes a change in behaviour, thought or sensation.

Simple partial seizures

An older term for a focal seizure that does not impair consciousness.

Status epilepticus

A very long seizure (more than 30 minutes) or a continuous state of seizures where one seizure follows another. Can occur in almost any seizure type; however convulsive status epilepticus where the person is experiencing ongoing tonic clonic seizures is considered a medical emergency and an ambulance must be called.

SUDEP

(Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy)
If a person with epilepsy dies suddenly and no obvious cause can be found after a post mortem examination, it is called SUDEP. The actual cause of SUDEP is not known.

Temporal lobe epilepsy

Term for epilepsy arising in the temporal lobe of the brain.

Tonic Seizure

A generalised seizure, sometimes referred to as a "drop attack". There is a stiffening without jerking, that may cause falling.

Tonic-clonic seizure

A generalised seizure in which the person falls, loses consciousness, stiffens and the body jerks.

References:

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Mittan, R. J. (1986). Living Well with Epilepsy. New Zealand Epilepsy Association, Hamilton.

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