

Revised Terminology for Epilepsy and Seizures

Defining Epilepsy

Epilepsy is now considered a “disease” rather than a “disorder”. Researchers and clinicians believe that the term “disorder” was too poorly understood, and minimized the serious and long-lasting nature of epilepsy.

A person is considered to have epilepsy if they:

- Have at least two seizures or
- Have one seizure and are very likely to have another or
- Are diagnosed with an epilepsy syndrome.

Changes in Terminology: Focal Seizures

Focal seizures occur when excessive electrical discharge is limited to one hemisphere of the brain. Focal seizures are the most common type of seizures in adults.

Outdated term	Current term	Description
<i>Partial seizure</i>	Focal seizure	Occurs when excessive electrical discharge is limited to one hemisphere of the brain. Focal seizures are the most common type of seizures in adults.
<i>Simple partial seizure</i>	Focal seizures without impairment of consciousness	Focal seizure in which the person remains aware. This seizure may be referred to as an aura, and may progress to a focal dyscognitive (complex partial) or generalized seizure. Symptoms may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Jerking in one area of the body that may spread to another - Unusual sensation e.g. seeing, smelling, or hearing things that aren't there - A sudden overwhelming feeling e.g. joy or fear - Stomach upset, dizziness, tingling, flushing, sweating, goosebumps, etc. These seizures may last anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes.
<i>Complex partial seizure</i>	Focal dyscognitive seizure	Focal seizure in which the person's awareness is altered. The individual may experience an aura initially (see above). The person may appear dazed and confused; a dreamlike

(an older term is psychomotor)		experience may occur. The individual may perform random purposeless movements called automatisms, such as chewing motions, mumbling, lip smacking, head turning, pulling at clothing, or random wandering. A period of disorientation and confusion typically follows. These seizures often last between 1-2 minutes.
<i>Partial seizure secondarily generalized</i>	Focal seizure evolving to a bilateral convulsive seizure	Occurs when a seizure starting in one hemisphere of the brain (focal seizure) spreads and becomes generalized to both hemispheres.

Changes in terminology: Generalized Seizures

Generalized seizures occur when excessive electrical discharge is widespread and involves both brain hemispheres. The seizure may or may not be convulsive.

Terminology for the different types of generalized seizures has remained the same in recent years and includes tonic-clonic, absence, clonic, tonic, atonic and myoclonic seizures. However, the very old terms “petit mal” and “grand mal” may still be heard.

Outdated term(s)	Current term	Description
Petit mal	Absence	Generalized seizure in which the person's awareness or consciousness is altered. The individual may have a blank stare and abruptly stop talking, and not even realize that a seizure occurred. The person may also experience rapid eye blinking; their eyes may also roll upwards. These seizures are often misinterpreted as daydreaming or inattentiveness, and typically last about 10 seconds.
Grand mal	Tonic-Clonic	<p>Tonic phase – typically involves a crying out or groan, loss of awareness, and a fall as consciousness is lost and muscles stiffen.</p> <p>Clonic phase – typically involves a rhythmic jerking and twitching of the muscles in all four limbs and other parts of the body.</p> <p>During a tonic-clonic seizure there may be shallow breathing, a bluish or gray skin colour, and drooling. Urinary or bowel control may be lost. Awareness is regained slowly. A period of fatigue, confusion, and severe headache is often experienced after this type of seizure. These seizures can occur:</p>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - when there is excessive electrical discharge in both hemispheres at the beginning of the seizure; OR - when a focal seizure spreads to both hemispheres; referred to as “a focal seizure evolving to a bilateral convulsive seizure” <p>These seizures typically last between 1-3 minutes.</p>
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Changes in Terminology: Causes of Epilepsy

Outdated term(s)	Current term	Description
<i>Symptomatic</i>	Causes of epilepsy previously categorized as “symptomatic” now fall into one or more of the following categories: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Structural - Metabolic - Immune - Infectious 	Causes may include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Birth injury (e.g. lack of oxygen to the baby’s brain at birth) - Developmental disorder (e.g. brain damage to the fetus during pregnancy) - Brain trauma - Infection (e.g. meningitis) - Brain tumor - Stroke - Scar in the brain (e.g. mesial temporal sclerosis) - Neurodegenerative disorder (e.g. Alzheimer’s disease) - Metabolic disorder (e.g. phenylketonuria or PHU) - Autoimmune disorder - Alcohol and drug abuse
<i>Idiopathic</i>	Genetic (or presumed genetic)	The cause of epilepsy is genetic.
<i>Cryptogenic</i>	Unknown	The cause of epilepsy is unknown and a genetic cause is not suspected.

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