

types of seizures won't know where they are or what they're doing. They'll seem to be in a daze and will be unable to talk or follow instructions. They might look as if they are chewing. They might pick at clothes, try to take them off or even just mumble or wander. The important thing is to just keep an eye on them and keep them safe until they return to normal, and then just offer them assistance and reassure them.

## Epilepsy in Metropolitan Washington

About one in every 100 people has epilepsy. This means there are about 44,000 people in D.C. and Northern Virginia who have epilepsy—and it can affect anyone at any time, regardless of age, race, gender or socioeconomic status. For many people with epilepsy the biggest problem is not the disorder itself, but society's negative attitudes toward people with the condition. After all, more people have epilepsy than have cerebral palsy, Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis combined—but fewer people know about it than know about these conditions.

**Age of onset:** Epilepsy primarily affects the very young and the very old, although anyone can get epilepsy at any time. Twenty percent of cases develop before the age of five. Fifty percent develop before the age of 25. It is increasingly associated with the elderly, and there are as many cases of epilepsy in those 60 years of age and older as in children 10 years of age and under.

**Causes:** In about 70 percent of cases there is no known cause. Of the remaining 30 percent, the following are the most frequent causes:

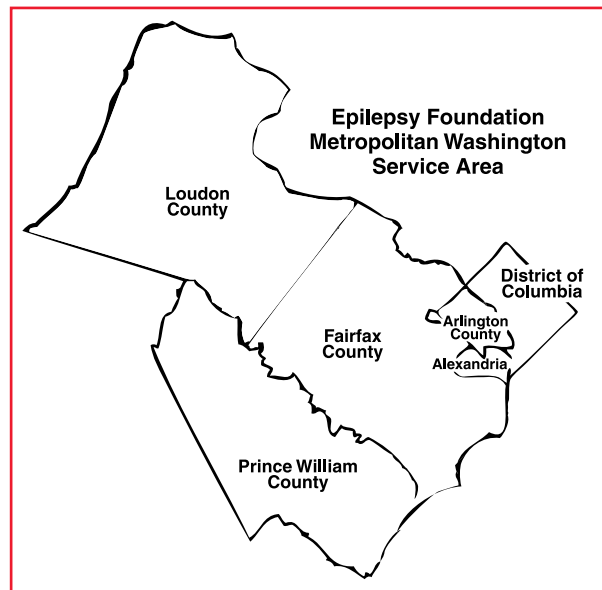
- Brain tumor and/or stroke.

- Head trauma, especially from automobile accidents, gunshot wounds, sports accidents, and falls and blows.
- Poisoning, such as lead poisoning, and substance abuse.
- Infection, such as meningitis or viral encephalitis or lupus erythematosus and others.
- Maternal injury, infection or illness that affects the developing brain of the fetus during pregnancy.

## To Find Out More

To find out more about epilepsy, seizures and seizure first aid, contact the Epilepsy Foundation Metropolitan Washington at (301) 549-3700 ext. 2117, (301) 918-2117, or visit [www.efmetrowashington.org](http://www.efmetrowashington.org) or write to:

Epilepsy Foundation Metropolitan Washington  
8301 Professional Place East  
Landover, MD 20785



# Living with Epilepsy



**EPILEPSY  
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METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON  
*Not another moment lost to seizures™*

## What is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a medical condition that produces seizures affecting a variety of mental and physical functions. It's also called a seizure disorder. A seizure happens when a brief, strong surge of electrical activity affects part or all of the brain. When a person has two or more seizures, they are considered to have epilepsy.



Seizures can last a few seconds to a few minutes. They can have many symptoms—convulsions, loss of consciousness, blank staring, lip smacking or limb jerking. These latter symptoms are not always recognized as seizures by the person experiencing them or by health care professionals.

One in 10 adults will have a seizure sometime during their life while one percent of the population—more than 3 million Americans—live with epilepsy.

## Myths and Facts About Epilepsy

**Myth:** A person having a seizure can swallow his tongue.

**Fact:** It is impossible to swallow your tongue and, in fact, efforts to hold the tongue down with your fingers or a hard object can actually cause severe injury to the person experiencing a seizure.

**Myth:** People with epilepsy are dangerous or possessed by the devil.

**Fact:** Epilepsy is a neurological disorder and

it is rare that someone having a seizure will harm another person.

**Myth:** You should hold a person down while he's having a seizure.

**Fact:** Holding someone down while they're having a seizure can injure them. Instead, you should make sure he's safe and that the area around him is free of hard and sharp objects.

**Myth:** You should perform artificial respiration on someone during, or after, a seizure.

**Fact:** Artificial respiration is only needed if the person does not start breathing after the seizure has stopped—and it is extremely unlikely that it will be needed at all.

## Seizure First Aid

First aid for epilepsy is fairly simple—the most important thing is to keep the person safe until the seizure stops by itself. The key things to remember when providing first aid for someone experiencing a seizure are to:

- Keep calm and reassure other people who may be nearby.
- Time the seizure.
- Clear the area around him of anything hard or sharp, so as to help ensure his safety.
- Loosen his tie, or anything else he might have around his neck that may make breathing difficult.
- Put something flat and soft, like a folded jacket, under his head.
- Turn him gently onto one side. This will help keep his airway clear.
- Stay with him until the seizure ends naturally.
- Be friendly and reassuring as he returns to consciousness.

- Offer to call a taxi, friend or relative to help him get home if he seems confused or unable to get home by himself.

You should also know things you should NOT do:

- Do not try to force his mouth open with your fingers or a hard implement. It is not true that a person having a seizure can swallow his tongue. Efforts to hold the tongue down can seriously injure his teeth or jaw.
- Don't attempt artificial respiration unless he doesn't start breathing again after the seizure has stopped (note that this is extremely unlikely to happen).
- Don't hold him down or try to stop his movements.

## Types of Seizures

There are many different types of seizures. People may experience just one type or more than one. The kind of seizures that most people have heard of makes a person fall, get stiff, and then shake for a short time. Breathing may be faint, and even stop briefly. After a minute or



two, the shaking and jerking slows down and stops. Breathing starts again and slowly gets back to normal.

This kind of seizure may be called different names—a convulsive seizure, a grand mal seizure, or a generalized tonic clonic seizure, which is what most doctors refer to it as.

Other types of seizures vary widely, but there are some (complex partial seizures, for instance) that make people lose touch with their surroundings. People experiencing these