

November Is Epilepsy Awareness Month

Sponsor: Epilepsy Foundation

Background: The first nationwide epilepsy public education campaign was conducted by the Epilepsy Foundation of America in June and July of 1968. In the following year, November was declared National Epilepsy Awareness Month. Since that date the observance has been recognized in most years by a White House message from the President. In 2003, the U.S. Congress passed a formal resolution declaring November as National Epilepsy Awareness Month.

Purpose: There are more than 3 million people in the U.S. with epilepsy and 200,000 new cases develop each year. For many people with epilepsy the biggest problem is not the disorder itself, but society's attitudes toward people with the condition. The purposes of Epilepsy Awareness Month are to:

- 1) dispel common myths about the disorder,
- 2) promote public awareness and understanding of the condition,
- 3) inform people with seizure disorders and their families about service programs and informational resources available nationally and in their local areas, and
- 4) educate the public about the symptoms of epilepsy and seizure disorders so that those with thus far undiagnosed epilepsy can be found and treated.

Themes: Recent Epilepsy Month themes have promoted seizure safety in schools, recognition of hidden signs of epilepsy in children, employment of adults with epilepsy, respect for young people with epilepsy among their peers, and awareness that effective solutions are still needed for people severely affected by seizure disorders.

PROGRAMS TYPICALLY CONDUCTED DURING EPILEPSY MONTH:

Public Education: Media interviews, poster campaigns, public service announcements, exhibits, community presentations and other activities aimed at informing the public about epilepsy.

School Alerts: Programs for schools, including materials created in cooperation with the National Association of School Nurses, which educate children and school personnel about epilepsy.

Family Education: Local and regional conferences and seminars for people who have epilepsy and their families.

In-Service Training: Seminars and training sessions for public employees, paraprofessionals and allied health personnel.

Fundraising Events: Wide range of community fundraisers, usually with a strong public education component.

MESSAGES:

Acceptance: People with epilepsy have the same range of intelligence and abilities as the rest of the population. They are found at all levels of business, government, the arts and other professions, but discrimination, especially in employment, is still common and isolates and limits the participation of people with epilepsy in society.

Scope of the Disorder: Seizures are a major national health problem. Epilepsy and seizure disorders can present with many different symptoms with a wide range of severity, so people with epilepsy or seizure disorders may have mild visible symptoms with no apparent disability, or they might have severe epilepsy and need extra help with daily living. About the same number of people die each year from seizures as die from either breast cancer or traffic accidents.

First Aid: Do not put anything into the mouth of a person having a seizure. You cannot swallow your tongue during a seizure. Do not restrain a person who is having a seizure—doing so will make the person *more* likely to hurt himself. Seizures usually stop on their own after a minute or two—you should usually only need to call an ambulance for seizures last more than five minutes or occur in a series.

Help and Information: The Epilepsy Foundation's Web site (www.epilepsyfoundation.org) is the most comprehensive and authoritative medically reviewed consumer information about seizure disorders on the Internet. In addition, the organization provides a nationwide information service [(800) 332-1000] that is staffed by professionals who respond to caller questions. The toll-free service handles more than 20,000 inquiries in English and Spanish each year. The Foundation's affiliates also offer information and direct services in communities across the country.

Diagnosis: Like many health problems, epilepsy is treated most effectively when it is diagnosed early. The disorder occurs most frequently in children and among the elderly. Parents and school personnel should know the signs of a seizure, especially the subtle ones (such as inattention or daydreaming) in children. Older adults, their families, and caregivers should know the symptoms (such as confusion, lapses in memory and strange feelings) that could be the signs of late-onset epilepsy.

Prevention: Epilepsy can happen to anyone at anytime. While there are many causes of seizures, the major cause, which is *preventable*, is head injury.

Special Issues: Messages related to epilepsy and the elderly, epilepsy and women's health, status epilepticus (non-stop, life-threatening seizures), and other emerging issues are also becoming an important part of Epilepsy Month, as are messages that reach out to African Americans, Hispanics and other special populations.