

About Epilepsy

Epilepsy is the most common neurological condition in children and the third most common in adults after Alzheimer's and stroke. Despite modern therapy, about one million people continue to experience seizures or significant side effects from treatment. An Epilepsy Foundation report published in 2000 revealed that epilepsy costs the nation more than \$16.6 billion a year in health care and unemployment.

Epilepsy is a generic term used to define a family of seizure disorders. When a person has two or more unprovoked seizures, they are considered to have epilepsy.

A seizure is a brief disturbance of electrical activity in the brain. Twenty-five million Americans (one in every ten) have had, or will have, a seizure at some point in their lives.

Prevalence: Almost 3 million people in the U.S. have some form of epilepsy. Thirty percent of them are children under the age of 18. A large number of children and adults have undetected or untreated epilepsy.

Incidence: About 200,000 new cases of seizure disorders and epilepsy are diagnosed each year.

Age of onset: Epilepsy primarily affects the very young and the very old, although anyone can get epilepsy at anytime. 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. The more severe the injury, the greater the risk of developing epilepsy.
- Poisoning, such as lead poisoning, and substance abuse. For example, more than 5,000 persons each year are reported to suffer seizures caused by alcoholism.
- Infection, such as meningitis, viral encephalitis, lupus erythematosus and, less frequently, mumps, measles, diphtheria and others.
- Maternal injury, infection or systemic illness that affects the developing brain of the fetus during pregnancy.

Role of heredity: All people inherit varying degrees of susceptibility to seizures. The genetic factor is assumed to be greater when no specific cause can be identified.

A Worldwide Problem: The World Health Organization estimates there are 40 to 50 million people with epilepsy throughout the world. The annual incidence in third-world nations is twice that of the United States (2/100 compared to 1/100). In many countries the condition remains a stigmatizing condition surrounded with mystical beliefs and social taboos. On a global basis, an astonishing three fourths of people with epilepsy receive no treatment for their seizures.