

# Absence Epilepsy

## More than a Little Illness



Kelly J. Butler, MPAS, PA-C

### KEYWORDS

- Absence epilepsy • Petit mal • EEG • Generalized epilepsy • Ethosuximide
- Childhood epilepsy • Idiopathic epilepsy • 3-Hz spike and wave

### KEY POINTS

- Absence seizures are an important condition to accurately and promptly recognize in affected children because failure to do so increases the child's risk of injury and, if untreated, can lead to decline in academic performance.
- Absence seizures are a form of generalized epilepsy that primarily affects children and are characterized by brief episodes of loss of consciousness that typically occur multiple times a day without treatment.
- A diagnosis of absence seizures is made by obtaining a history consistent with the condition and a specific pattern on an electroencephalogram; treatment is with antiseizure medications and patients must be monitored for side effects, efficacy, and development of any new seizure types.

### DEFINITIONS

#### **Seizure**

A manifestation of disordered brain electrical discharges; a single event, a symptom of cerebral dysfunction (**Box 1**).

The particular characteristics of a seizure episode depend on the area of the brain where the disordered electrical activity occurs and the extent of the involvement (**Fig. 1**).

#### **Epilepsy**

A medical condition associated with a tendency toward recurrent seizures without a transient cause.

1. Hyponatremia → seizure

A provoked seizure, once sodium level returns to normal no further tendency toward seizures, therefore not representative of epilepsy

2. No trigger → seizure + no trigger → seizure

Two or more unprovoked seizures, high likelihood of recurrence = epilepsy

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Disclosure Statement: The author has nothing to disclose.

Comprehensive Epilepsy Program, Children's Health, Children's Medical Center Dallas, 1935 Medical District Drive, Dallas, TX 75235, USA

E-mail address: [KELLY.BUTLER@childrens.com](mailto:KELLY.BUTLER@childrens.com)

Physician Assist Clin 1 (2016) 627–637

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cpha.2016.05.008>

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**Box 1**  
**Causes and signs of seizures**

*Some causes of seizures*

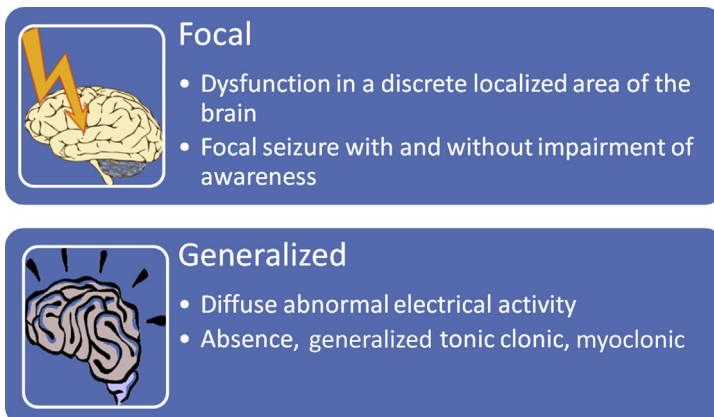
- Trauma
- Toxins
- Infection
- Metabolic disturbance
- Underlying brain dysfunction.

*Signs of a seizure: changes in sensation, motor control, or consciousness*

- Stiffening
- Jerking
- Loss of tone (astatic or atonic)
- Change in sensation (tingling, numbness)
- Autonomic (sweating, pallor, nausea)
- Impaired consciousness

Epilepsy can be expressed in many ways, but individual patients' seizures tend to be stereotypical discrete episodes of symptoms. One patient may always have whole body convulsions, another may always experience sensory changes without impairment of consciousness, whereas yet another patient may have several different seizure types as part of an epilepsy syndrome. Absence seizures are just one possible type of generalized seizures. A patient having recurrent absence seizures has epilepsy and may have an epilepsy syndrome, such as childhood absence epilepsy or juvenile absence epilepsy (**Box 2**).

Absence seizures are often first brought to attention by a child's teacher, who reports that the child sometimes suddenly stops what the child is doing or saying and stares off into space and is unresponsive but then quickly resumes prior activity.



**Fig. 1.** Characteristics of seizure episode.

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