

Understanding your dog's epilepsy



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What is epilepsy?

As in humans, epilepsy in dogs is a brain condition that causes repeated seizures or "fits".

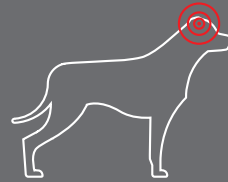
It is the commonest long-term neurological condition in dogs, affecting an estimated 1 in 111 dogs. In most cases, epilepsy is a lifelong condition which cannot be cured, but which can be managed with medication and diet.

Most epileptic dogs have "generalised" seizures causing them to suddenly lose consciousness, shake, twitch and convulse and often lose control of their bladder and bowels. The seizure usually lasts up to a few minutes before the dog regains consciousness. Dogs are often disorientated and drowsy for a few hours after a seizure, but are usually their normal selves in between each episode. Occasionally, epileptic dogs have "focal" seizures that cause less dramatic signs such as facial twitching or head shaking. This is because only a small area of their brain is affected.

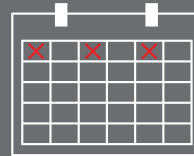
Whether generalised or focal, the "fits" occur due to abnormal electrical activity in the brain that cause dogs to show the strange behaviours and movements classically seen during a seizure.

Your vet may suspect your dog is epileptic if there are two or more seizures more than 24 hours apart. Sometimes it is hard to differentiate seizures from other problems, so filming your dog's "attack" to show to your vet can be invaluable in helping them make the correct diagnosis.

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What has caused my dog's epilepsy?

When your dog is diagnosed with epilepsy, it is a common reaction to want to understand why your dog has developed this condition.

While seizures can be caused by metabolic abnormalities (e.g. liver conditions), poisonings, head trauma or even tumours, for most dogs no obvious cause can be found and your vet will diagnose "idiopathic epilepsy".

Although any breed of dog can become epileptic, idiopathic epilepsy appears to be a genetic (inherited condition) with some breeds being predisposed. These include the Boxer, Border Terrier, Cavalier King Charles Spaniel, Labrador Retriever, Poodle, Yorkshire Terrier, Rottweiler, Papillon, Beagle, Miniature Schnauzer, Bernese Mountain Dog, Border Collie, Shetland Sheepdog and Flat Coated Retriever.

Most dogs with idiopathic epilepsy have their first seizure between the ages of 1 and 3 years old.



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How is epilepsy treated?

Canine epilepsy is rarely curable, but there are many different medications that your vet can prescribe to help manage your dog's condition.

Once the medication has been adjusted (which can take weeks), it will normally at least reduce the number and severity of the seizures – and sometimes prevent them altogether.

The goal of therapy is to maintain seizure-free status without causing unacceptable side effects. This is achieved in about a third of epileptic dogs.

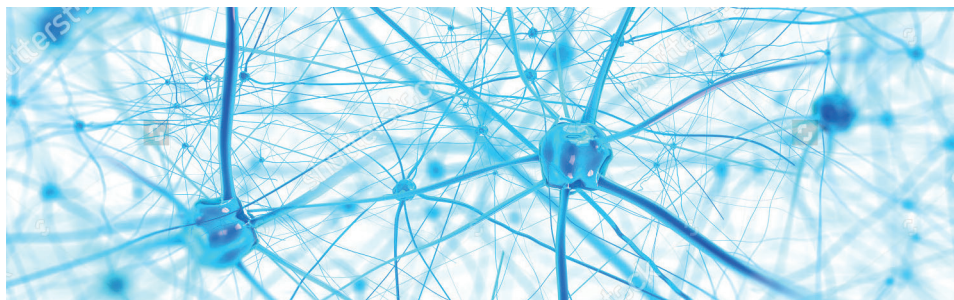
The good news is that most epileptic dogs enjoy life just as much as the next dog despite their condition.

If your vet recommends antiepileptic drug (AED) therapy for your dog, it is vital that you follow the instructions to the letter as inconsistent administration of AEDs can trigger seizures. It is very important that you:

- Give your dog their medication at the same time each day
- Give the correct dosage of medication as prescribed by your vet
- Do not stop the treatment without first discussing this in detail with your vet

It is likely that your dog will experience some side effects of their AEDs, especially for the first few days and weeks. These side effects often improve or disappear as your dog's body gets used to the new medication. If side effects do persist and are affecting your dog's quality of life, your vet may consider changing the treatment regime.

- Common side effects include increased appetite and thirst, sleepiness and wobbliness, vomiting and diarrhoea, excitability and weight gain.
- Because of the high risk of side effects and the low number of epileptic dogs whose seizures are completely controlled on AEDs alone, new diets are currently being developed which contain ingredients which may help improve seizure control further.



Top tips:

What should I do if my dog is having a seizure?

The most important thing to do if your dog starts having a seizure is to stay calm.

- Your dog is almost certainly unconscious so will be unaware of what is happening to them and is not in any pain, even if their movements appear violent.
 - Ensure your dog is not going to cause themselves any harm (e.g. by falling down stairs) and clear the area around them so they cannot hurt themselves. Otherwise leave them alone. Some epileptic people say that they find it easier if the seizure is allowed to run its course.
 - Calling your dog's name to try to get them out of the seizure may therefore not be the best thing for your dog.
 - Never put anything in their mouths – especially your fingers – as your dog could inadvertently bite you during the fit. Dogs are highly unlikely to swallow their tongue while seizing (although they may bite their tongue and cause minor injury).
 - Once you have ensured your dog is safe, take note of the time. Seizures should last less than 5 minutes. If they take longer than this, you need to call your vet immediately.
 - It's a good idea to have your vet's telephone number near to hand at all times just in case.
- It's also very useful to carefully observe and note down exactly what happened during the seizure. How did it first start? Did anything trigger the seizure (bright lights or loud noises for example)? Was one side of the body more affected than the other? What exactly did your dog do during the seizure – paddling, chomping, vocalising, etc? A journal recording your dog's seizure events will be very useful for your vet when they plan the optimal care plan for your dog.
 - For a period of time after the seizure your dog may be disorientated and uncoordinated. Make sure they are in a safe place where they cannot harm themselves while they are feeling wobbly.

Call your vet **immediately** if:

1. The seizure lasts longer than 5 minutes
2. Your dog has one seizure followed by another without the dog becoming fully normal in between
3. Your dog experiences more than one seizure in a 24 hour period
4. In the unusual circumstance of having to transport a seizing dog to the veterinary surgery, use a thick blanket or children's plastic sledge as a makeshift stretcher.
5. Contact your vet for help and advice if you are alone with a seizing dog.

Top tips:

How can I best care for my epileptic dog?

Medications

Your epileptic dog will almost certainly be prescribed anti-epileptic drugs to help manage their condition. Top tips for medicating your dog are as follows:

- Follow your vet's instruction to the letter, giving your dog their medications at the correct dose and at the same time each day.
- To help you remember your dog's medications, ask your local pharmacy for a pill container so you can prepare a week's worth of medications in advance. A quick glance at the container helps answer the "Did I or didn't I dose my dog?" question instantly! Some even have an alarm to remind you when the pills are due.
- If you only have one dog and they have a good appetite, you can use an automatic feeder to dispense food and medication at a specific time, if you need to go out when a dose is due.
- Pills and medicine can usually be given with food, but check with your vet for exact information about your dog's specific medication.



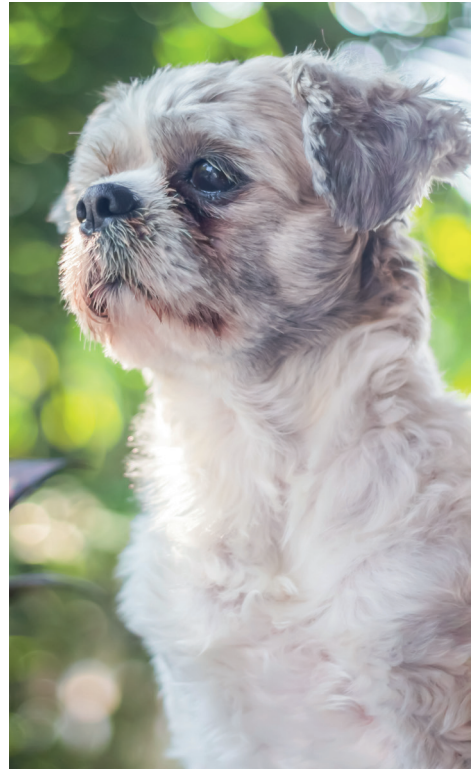
Safety

Owners of epileptic dogs are naturally concerned about leaving their dog alone in case they have a seizure while they are out. There are some simple steps to help keep your epileptic dog safe while you are out:

- If your dog is used to a crate and you are not going out for long periods, consider crating your dog while you are out. A plastic crate with no metal bars is best as it reduces the chance of your dog's paws getting stuck in the event of a seizure.
- Take your dog's collar off when you go out to reduce the risk of choking during a seizure.
- Baby gates are useful to confine your dog in a room that you have made as safe as possible in the event of a seizure.
- If you have several dogs, you will need to assess how the other dogs behave when your epileptic dog has a seizure. If they become aggressive, consider keeping your epileptic dog in a separate room or space when you go out just in case.
- Never leave an epileptic dog alone in an area with water deep enough to drown in.
- A baby monitor is a useful tool to help you hear your dog at night if they are in a different part of the house.

Make sure your epileptic dog has an ID tag that highlights their condition (these can be purchased online or from your vet or pharmacy). It is bad enough to "lose" your dog without also worrying they are missing a vital medication dose.

It is important to know which location your vet works from out of hours (this may not be their normal practice location) and have the emergency number always to hand.



Where can I find further resources?

- For more information on canine epilepsy, the International Veterinary Epilepsy Task Force (IVETF) has come together to set out standardised guidelines regarding many aspects of canine epilepsy. Their consensus statements can be found at <http://blogs.biomedcentral.com/bmcseriesblog/2015/09/04/veterinary-neurology-experts-collaborate-publish-consensus-statements-pets-epilepsy/>
- The Royal Veterinary College (RVC) in London has published various papers and podcasts about canine epilepsy. They can be found at:
<http://veterinaryrecord.bmj.com/content/177/12/306>
<https://soundcloud.com/bmjpodcasts/epilepsy-beyond-seizures>
- In addition, the RVC has a pet epilepsy tracker that is available for Android (https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.rvc.phonegap&hl=en_GB) and Apple (<https://itunes.apple.com/gb/app/rvc-pet-epilepsy-tracker/id992917809?mt=8>) devices.

For more information on how nutrition could support dogs with epilepsy as adjunct to the drug treatment, please contact your veterinary surgeon, or Purina at xxx.

Your veterinary clinic details: