

Epilepsy in Dogs

Overview

- A seizure (fit) is a period of uncontrolled body movements, caused by abnormal electrical activity in the brain.
- Epilepsy (also known as 'idiopathic epilepsy'), is a common cause of seizures in dogs between 6 months and 6 years old.
- Epilepsy is often inherited (passed down from a parent).
- Epilepsy can't be cured but can usually be managed with medication.
- A one-off seizure doesn't necessarily mean that your dog has epilepsy, many healthy dogs will have a couple of unexplained seizures in their life.
- For information on other causes of seizures in dogs read our page 'Seizures in dogs'.



First aid for a seizure

- Don't panic
- Don't go near your dog's mouth - they may accidentally bite
- If necessary, move them to a safe, padded area where they can't hurt themselves
- Turn the lights off and make the room as quiet as possible
- Time the seizure – make a note of how long it lasts
- Phone your vet for advice
- Avoid transporting your dog until the seizure has stopped (unless your vet advises otherwise)



Watch our video: 'What to do if your pet has a seizure'

When to contact your vet

If your dog is having a seizure, **follow our first aid advice before** contacting your vet. **Do not transport your dog during a seizure unless your vet specifically tells you to.**

Call your vet for advice once your dog's seizure has stopped, or if it's lasted more than a few minutes.

Epilepsy explained

A seizure (fit) is a period of uncontrolled body movements due to abnormal electrical activity in the brain. Seizures can develop for a number of reasons – epilepsy is one of the most common, especially in dogs aged between 6 months and 6 years old. You may hear epilepsy called 'idiopathic epilepsy' or 'true epilepsy'. Epilepsy is often caused by a genetic fault, passed down from a parent and it's common in certain breeds, such as Collies.

Your vet will want to investigate and rule out other illnesses before diagnosing epilepsy. For a full list of causes, read our page 'Seizures in dogs'.

If your dog has one, or even two seizures, it doesn't necessarily mean they have epilepsy – a surprising number of dogs have a couple of unexplained seizures in their life.

Symptoms

Before a seizure. Before a seizure your dog's behaviour may change – they may become vacant, unsteady or agitated.

Seizures range from slight muscle twitching in one part of the head or body (partial seizure), to a whole body seizure.

Symptoms of a full body seizure:

- Loss of consciousness
- Falling over
- Foaming at the mouth
- Chewing
- Muscle spasms and thrashing

- Peeing and/or pooing

Symptoms of a partial seizure:

- Twitching in a certain part of the body (often face or one leg)
- Vacant and unresponsive

Watching a seizure can be very distressing but fortunately, they usually only last for a few minutes and your dog is very unlikely to know what is happening.

After a seizure. Once the seizure has passed, your dog will start to come round and recognise you again. Some dogs return to normal very quickly, and some take a few hours to get back to being themselves. The gap between seizures can vary from just a few minutes to many months or even years.

Cluster seizures. Cluster seizures are seizures with no breaks in between. Cluster seizures are an emergency and should always be treated by a vet. Call your vet immediately if your dog is having cluster seizures.

Treatment

Hospitalisation. If your dog is having a severe seizure, it's likely that they will need to stay in the veterinary hospital for stabilisation before starting investigations or medication.

No treatment. Your vet is likely to decide against using medicines if your dog has only ever had one seizure, or they are having infrequent seizures that aren't affecting their quality of life. You will need to monitor your dog and contact your vet if anything changes.

Investigations. Before starting treatment for epilepsy, your vet will want to make sure there is nothing else that could be causing your dog to have fits. They may want to run some tests on blood and urine or send your dog for a MRI scan.

Anticonvulsants. Epilepsy is often treated using medicines called anticonvulsants. Anticonvulsants stabilise the brain to reduce the chance and severity of a seizure. In many cases they are very effective and sometimes they stop seizures altogether. Once anticonvulsants have been started they must be given every day, for the rest of your dog's life (or as directed by your vet) – stopping anticonvulsant medicines suddenly can cause your dog's seizures to return. Once your dog is on anticonvulsants, your vet may want to run blood tests from time-to-time to make sure that everything is OK.

Outlook

If your dog has idiopathic epilepsy, their outlook is good – once they have been stabilised on medication (anticonvulsants) their seizures are likely to stop altogether or become much less severe/frequent.

Sadly, a very small number of cases don't respond to medication. If your dog is having a large number of seizures that can't be controlled it may be kinder to put them to sleep.

Prevention

You can't prevent idiopathic epilepsy, only treat it if it develops. Don't breed from a dog with epilepsy – they may pass the condition on to their pups.

Cost

Treatment for a pet with epilepsy can become very expensive over time. Consider insuring your dog as soon as you get them, before any signs of illness start. This will ensure you have all the support you need to care for them.

It's also very important to speak openly to your vet about your finances, the cost of treatment, as well as what you think is right for your dog. There are often several treatment options so if one doesn't work for you and your pet then the vet may be able to offer another.

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