Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is epilepsy? What is a seizure?

Epilepsy, also called a seizure disorder, is a disorder of the brain. A person is diagnosed with epilepsy when they have had two or more seizures.

Seizures, a short change in normal brain activity, are the main sign of epilepsy. Some seizures can look like staring spells. Other seizures cause a person to fall, shake, and lose awareness of what’s going on around them.

2. How long do seizures usually last?

A seizure usually lasts from a few seconds to a few minutes depending on the type of seizure.

3. What are the major types of seizures?

Seizures are classified into two groups:

1. Generalized seizures affect both sides of the brain.
2. Focal seizures affect just one area of the brain. These seizures are also called partial seizures.

4. If I have a seizure, does that mean I have epilepsy?

Not always. Seizures can also happen because of other medical problems. These problems include:

- A high fever.
- Low blood sugar.
- Alcohol or drug withdrawal.
5. What causes epilepsy?

For 2 out of 3 people, the cause of epilepsy is unknown (cryptogenic or idiopathic). Epilepsy can be caused by different conditions that affect a person’s brain. Some known causes include:

- Stroke
- Brain tumor.
- Brain infection from parasites (malaria, neurocysticercosis), viruses (influenza, dengue, Zika), and bacteria.
- Traumatic brain injury or head injury.
- Loss of oxygen to the brain (for example, during birth).
- Some genetic disorders (such as Down syndrome).
- Other neurologic diseases (such as Alzheimer’s disease).

6. What are the different types of seizures?

There are two main groups of seizures. A person with epilepsy can have more than one type of seizure.

1. **Generalized seizures affect both sides of the brain.**
   - Absence seizures or petit mal seizures, can cause rapid blinking or brief staring into space.
   - Tonic-clonic seizures or grand mal seizures, can make a person:
     - Cry out.
     - Lose consciousness.
     - Fall to the ground.
     - Have muscle jerks or spasms.
     - Feel tired

2. **Focal seizures are located in just one area of the brain. These seizures are also called partial seizures.**
   - Simple focal seizures affect a small part of the brain and can cause twitching or a change in sensation, such as a strange taste or smell.

7. Is epilepsy common?

Epilepsy is one of the most common conditions affecting the brain. In 2015, 1.2% of the US population had active epilepsy (95% CI* = 1.1-1.4). This is about 3.4 million people with epilepsy nationwide: 3 million adults and 470,000 children.
8. How can I prevent epilepsy?

While epilepsy usually cannot be prevented, these are some of the most common ways to reduce your risk of developing epilepsy:

- Have a healthy pregnancy. Some problems during pregnancy and childbirth may lead to epilepsy. Follow a prenatal care plan with your health care provider to keep you and your baby healthy.
- Prevent brain injuries.
- Lower the chances of stroke and heart disease.
- Be up-to-date on your vaccinations.
- Wash your hands and prepare food safely to prevent infections such as cysticercosis.

9. What is SUDEP?

Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy or SUDEP is a fatal complication of epilepsy. It is defined as the sudden and unexpected, non-traumatic and non-drowning death of a person with epilepsy, without a toxicological or anatomical cause of death detected during the post-mortem examination.

There are about 1.16 cases of SUDEP for every 1,000 people with epilepsy, although estimates vary. This translates to approximately 3,000 deaths per year in the United States.

10. What are the major risk factors for SUDEP?

The main risk factors for SUDEP are:

- Uncontrolled or frequent seizures.
- Generalized convulsive (also called tonic-clonic or grand mal) seizures.

Other possible risk factors may include:

- Seizures that begin at a young age.
- Many years of living with epilepsy.
- Missed doses of medicine.
- Drinking alcohol.
11. How do I prevent SUDEP?

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- The first and most important step to reduce your risk of SUDEP is to take your seizure medicine as prescribed.
- Avoid seizure triggers, if these are known.
- Avoid drinking too much alcohol.
- Learn how to better control your seizures with epilepsy self-management programs.
- Get enough sleep.
- Train adults in the house in seizure first aid.

For more, please visit thecameronboycefoundation.com and follow on Instagram @thecameronboycefoundation.