Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy or SUDEP refers to deaths in people with epilepsy that are not from injury, drowning, or other known causes. Most, but not all, cases of SUDEP happen during or right after a seizure.

Researchers do not understand the exact cause of SUDEP, but it may potentially be caused by:

- Breathing changes: A seizure may cause a person to have pauses in breathing. If these pauses last too long, they can reduce the oxygen in the blood to a dangerous level. Also, if a person’s airway gets blocked during a seizure, that can lead to suffocation.
- Heart rhythm changes: Rarely, a seizure may cause a dangerous heart rhythm or cardiac arrest.
- Other causes and mixed causes: SUDEP may happen because of a combination of breathing trouble and abnormal heart rhythm.

People with epilepsy are at increased risk of SUDEP if they have:

- Uncontrolled or frequent seizures.
- Generalized convulsive (what used to be called tonic-clonic or grand mal) seizures.
- Nocturnal seizures

Other things that may increase someone’s risk of SUDEP include:

- Seizures that start at a young age.
- Many years of living with epilepsy.
- Missing doses of medicine.
- Drinking alcohol.

Researchers estimate that for every 1,000 people with epilepsy, at least 1 person may die from SUDEP each year. This means that each year in the United States, there are about 3,000 deaths due to SUDEP. But counting SUDEP cases is hard because SUDEP is not always included on death certificates.

SUDEP occurs more often in people ages 21 to 40 compared to other age groups. Because SUDEP can happen unexpectedly to people who are so young, it can be very shocking for families and loved ones. Managing seizures may help.
Research has shown that controlling seizures may lower the chance of SUDEP. If you have epilepsy, the most important way to do this is to take your seizure medicine as prescribed.

**Other steps that might help lower the chance of SUDEP:**

- Consider a [seizure alert monitor](#) if you often have seizures at night.
- Avoid seizure triggers if you know what they are. Read more about [triggers](#).
- Don’t drink too much alcohol.
- Learn how to better control seizures and other symptoms with [self-management programs](#).
- Get enough [sleep](#).
- Make sure your family and friends know seizure [first aid](#).

If you are taking medicine and still having seizures, talk to your doctor about changing your medicine or other things that might help. If seizures continue, consider seeing an epilepsy specialist.

[Learn how to find specialty care here.](#)

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