

EPILEPSY FACT SHEET

*A person can be diagnosed with epilepsy at any time in his or her life.¹
It is as likely to begin in a person's 60s, 70s or 80s as it is during the first ten years of life.²
Julius Caesar, Albert Einstein and Alfred Nobel are thought to have had epilepsy.³*

What Is Epilepsy?

- A neurological condition that produces brief disturbances in the normal electrical functions of the brain, epilepsy affects a person's consciousness, bodily movements and sensations.⁴ These unusual bursts of intense electrical energy can occur in just one area of the brain (partial seizures) or can affect many areas of the brain (generalized seizures).⁵
- Epileptic seizures can vary in duration, frequency and severity, ranging from a muscle jerk or brief lapse of attention to a prolonged convulsion that may result in unconsciousness.
- In about 75 percent of cases, the cause of epilepsy cannot be identified, but factors such as head trauma, brain tumor, stroke, poisoning, brain tissue infection or prenatal-related injury can contribute to the onset of the disorder.⁶

What is the Impact of Epilepsy?

- Epilepsy is the most common neurological disorder of the brain worldwide,⁷ affecting more than 2.5 million Americans.⁸ Epilepsy affects individuals regardless of race, age or sex.⁹
- Epilepsy is increasingly more common among older people.¹⁰ An estimated 61,000 new cases of epilepsy occur each year among elderly Americans,¹¹ caused by common conditions such as stroke, heart attack and Alzheimer's disease.¹²
- The stigma associated with epilepsy is a very real concern for individuals living with the condition. For example, epilepsy can have a devastating effect on employability. A survey found 25 percent of working-age respondents with epilepsy were unemployed, with sixty-four percent of them directly attributing it to their epilepsy.¹³ In addition, the disorder can make it impossible for patients to drive,¹⁴ which can greatly reduce their mobility.
- Most seizures are benign, but a prolonged seizure can sometimes lead to brain damage or even death. People with epilepsy have a higher incidence of suicide and also tend to be more likely to suffer from sudden unexplained death syndrome and accidental death, especially by drowning.¹⁵
- Data show that epilepsy costs the United States approximately \$12.5 billion each year in both direct medical expenses and indirect costs such as lost wages and reduction in earnings.¹⁶

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¹ Epilepsy. Camden, New Jersey: Yahoo! Health: 2002.

² Answer Place, Life Aspects: Elderly. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2003.

³ More on Epilepsy. Maui, Hawaii: Epileptic Foundation of Maui: 2003.

⁴ What is Epilepsy? Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America; 2003.

⁵ Mental and Neurological Disorders. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization: June 2001.

⁶ What is Epilepsy? New York, New York: Parents Against Childhood Epilepsy, Inc.: 2003.

⁷ Mental and Neurological Disorders. Geneva, Switzerland: World Health Organization: June 2001.

⁸ The Crisis. Chicago, IL: Citizens United for Research in Epilepsy: 2003.

⁹ Epilepsy in the Elderly. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2002.

¹⁰ Epilepsy in the Elderly. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2002.

¹¹ Epilepsy: A Report to the Nation. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 1999.

¹² Causes of Epilepsy. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2002.

¹³ Epilepsy: A Report to the Nation. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 1999.

¹⁴ Answer Place, Living with Epilepsy: Elderly. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2003.

¹⁵ The Silent Issue: Epilepsy as a Cause of Death. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 2002.

¹⁶ Epilepsy: One of the Nation's Most Common Disabling Neurological Disorders. Atlanta, Georgia: National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion: August 2002.

Can Epilepsy Be Treated?

- Evidence suggests that early diagnosis and effective treatment can improve the long-term prognosis for people with epilepsy.¹⁷ Given the documented disruptions in education, employment, self-esteem and personal life that can be caused by the disorder, the quest for early recognition and treatment should be urgent.
- Treatment of epilepsy in the elderly can be more difficult because elderly patients often take numerous medications, increasing the risk for potential interactions with anti-epileptic drug therapy.¹⁸
- Up to 85 percent of people with epilepsy gain full or partial control of their seizures with treatments such as antiepileptic drugs.¹⁹ Surgery, the ketogenic diet or an implanted device that delivers electrical stimulation to the brain are other available treatment options.

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¹⁷ Epilepsy: A Report to the Nation. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 1999.

¹⁸ Answer Place, Treatment: Elderly. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America 2003.

¹⁹ Epilepsy Facts & Figures. Landover, Maryland: Epilepsy Foundation of America: 1999.