



epilepsy - glossary of terms

This is an alphabetical guide to the terms used by doctors in describing symptoms and treatment of epilepsy.

Its main purpose is to provide an easy reference for patients. It can be used by them when they are puzzled by medical terms which they hear when visiting their consultant or general practitioner.

It is possible that confusion could arise with the use of generic and trade names for the numerous drugs used in the treatment of epilepsy. It is hoped that the cross referencing in this list should help solve this problem.

It is not intended to be a comprehensive study of epilepsy. It is merely a summary of terms which, it is hoped, will lead to further reading

absence seizures

There is loss of consciousness but the person experiencing the seizure does not fall or convulse. Popularly but incorrectly referred to as "petit mal" seizures.

active epilepsy

The person with the condition continues to experience seizures.

acetazolamide

The generic name for the drug Diamox®

acetazolamide modified release

The generic name for the drug Diamix SR®

ACTH

Adrenocorticotrophic hormone. Can be helpful in treatment of infantile spasms when the usual antiepileptic drugs are having little effect.

adult onset seizures

Seizures which commence for the first time in adult life.

adversive seizure

A partial seizure which normally results in movement of the head and eyes to one side.

aetiology of epilepsy

The causes of epilepsy.

ambulatory EEG monitoring

The use of a portable EEG system which allows continuous EEG recordings to be taken over a 24 hour or longer period.

anticonvulsant

A drug used to control seizures.

antiepileptic medication

A drug prescribed to control epileptic seizures, either convulsive, non-convulsive or both.

astatic seizure

See atonic seizure

ataxia

Loss of co-ordination.

atonic seizure

a seizure characterized by sudden, brief (1-2 second) loss of muscle tone, causing person to fall

aura

The first symptom of an epileptic seizure, in the form of a physical sensation – sometimes a prior warning to the person of the onset of a seizure.

automatisms

Confused semi-purposeful movements usually occurring during complex partial seizures.

benzodiazepines

The generic name for a group of drugs including - Mogadon®, Valium®, Rivotril® and Frisium®.

break-through seizures

Seizures which occur unexpectedly following a long period of seizure control.

carbamazepine

The generic name of the antiepileptic drug Tegretol®.

carbamazepine modified release

The generic name of the antiepileptic drug Tegretol Retard®

cataplexy

A state where the muscles remain in a semi-rigid state which could last for several hours.

catamenial epilepsy

Epileptic seizures occurring at the time of or just before menstrual periods.

CAT scan

Computerised Axial Tomographic scan. A hi-tech computerised X-ray of the brain. Also known as a CT scan.

cerebral lesion

A structural abnormality in the brain.

classification of seizures

An internationally agreed system of classifying different types of seizure.

clobazam

The generic name of an antiepileptic drug Frisium®.

clonazepam

The generic name of an antiepileptic drug Rivotril®.

clonic movements

Twitches and generalised rhythmic muscular movements associated with seizures.

complex partial seizures

Seizures which often arise from the temporal lobe of the brain and in which consciousness is impaired. The person typically stares and displays automatisms

compliance

To conscientiously take drug therapy as and when prescribed.

convulsion

Violent jerking of muscles. Also called "fit" or "tonic-clonic seizure (grand mal)

congenital epilepsy

Epilepsy which has been present from birth.

Convulex®

A trade name for the drug valproic acid

cryptogenic epilepsy

Epilepsy having no obvious cause.

CT head scan

Computerised Tomographic scan. See CAT scan.

déjà vu

A feeling of repeating a previous experience. It may be an aura or a temporal lobe seizure.

Diamox®

The trade name for the antiepileptic drug acetazolamide

Diazemuls®

A trade name for the drug diazepam

diazepam

The generic name of drugs used to stop prolonged seizures ("status epilepticus"). The trade names of this preparation are Valium®, Diazemuls® or Stesolid®.

differential diagnosis

A possible alternative diagnosis to epilepsy.

diphenyl hydantoin

A generic name for the drug Epanutin®. Also known generally as phenytoin.

diurnal seizures

Seizures occurring in the daytime.

driving restrictions

Statutory requirements which determine whether a person with epilepsy may hold a driving licence or have it withdrawn.

drug interactions

The effect that different drugs have on each other.

drug level measurement

Tests to establish the level of a drug in the blood.

drug side effects

The unwanted effects which drugs may produce when used in treatment.

ECT

Electro Convulsive Therapy. A technique rarely used in psychiatric medicine which is used to induce convulsions. It plays no part in the treatment of epilepsy.

EEG
Electroencephalogram. A test which measures the electrical activity of the brain, used in the investigation and management of epilepsy.

Emeside®
A trade name for the drug ethosuximide

Epanutin®
The trade name of the drug phenytoin

epilepsy
The name given to the condition in which people are subject to recurrent, unprovoked seizures.

epilepsy associations
Charitable organisations which exist to help those who have epilepsy and their families

epilepsy centres
Centres offering residential care for those with severe epilepsy.

Epilim®
Trade name of the drug sodium valproate

ethosuximide
The generic name for the drugs Zarontin® and Emeside®.

febrile convulsion
A seizure occurring in a child under the age of five and associated with a rise in the child's temperature.

fit
A word frequently used instead of "seizure" or "convulsion."

focal motor seizure
A seizure arising from a part of the brain which controls movement. If it arises in the part controlling the movement of the left arm then that arm will move without control during the seizure.

focal onset
The seizure is clearly identified as starting in a particular part of the brain.

focal sensory seizure
An epileptic seizure which involves feelings such as tingling sensations rather than convulsive movement. There is no loss of consciousness.

Frisium®
The trade name for the drug clobazam

frontal lobe seizure
A seizure which has its origin in the frontal lobe of the brain.

gabapentin
The generic name of the antiepileptic drug Neurontin®,

Gabitril®
The trade name for the drug tiagabine

Gardenal®
A trade name for the drug phenobarbitone,

generalised seizure

Seizures which involve abnormal electrical activity across the whole brain. There is always a loss of consciousness. Tonic-clonic (grand mal) and absence (petit mal) seizures are examples of generalised seizures.

generic name

The chemical name of a drug.

grand mal seizure

Popular term for what is correctly called a tonic-clonic seizure.

gum hypertrophy

A possible side effect of phenytoin whereby the gums overgrow, the teeth become unsightly and may bleed.

hirsutism

A possible side effect of phenytoin which results in an excess growth of body and facial hair.

Hypnovel®

The trade name for the drug midazolam

hyperventilation seizures

Seizures which are provoked by over breathing particularly absence seizures.

ictus

Latin for "stroke" but also meaning "fit," "convulsion" or "seizure."

ictal

Relating to a "fit," "convulsion" or "seizure."

idiopathic epilepsy

Epilepsy with no known cause. Now recognised to have genetic causes.

ILAE

International League Against Epilepsy.

incidence of epilepsy

The number of new diagnoses of epilepsy occurring in a year in a population of 1,000. The time limit is usually one year.

infantile spasms

Seizures occurring in infants commonly between four and nine months and rarely after twelve months. See also Salaam attacks.

ischaemic attacks

Stroke like episodes sometimes often mistakenly diagnosed as being epilepsy. It is the result of an inadequate flow of blood to a part of the brain.

interictal period

The time between seizures

intractable epilepsy

Epilepsy which is very difficult or nearly impossible to control satisfactorily.

intramuscular medication

Drugs injected directly into muscle tissue.

intravenous medication

Drugs introduced by injection directly into a vein.

Jacksonian march or seizure

The type of seizure called after the English neurologist Hughlings Jackson, now referred to as focal

motor seizures.

The seizure begins in the fingers or toes and spreads or moves ("marches") up the limb to involve the whole limb, or the whole of one side of the body.

Janz Syndrome

Juvenile myoclonic epilepsy.

Keppra®

A trade name for the drug levetiracetam

ketogenic diet

A high fat diet sometimes recommended when drugs fail to control seizures.

Lennox-Gastaut Syndrome

A childhood epileptic disorder in which the child has frequent seizures of different kinds and has severe learning difficulties.

Lamictal®

A trade name of the drug lamotrigine,

lamotrigine

The generic name of an antiepileptic drug Lamictal®.

lesion

Disease of, or damage to part of the body.

levetiracetam

A generic name for the drug Keppra®

lobe

Region of the brain which controls or co-ordinates specific activities of the body. Each side of the brain has four lobes – frontal, parietal, temporal and occipital.

lorazepam

A drug which is used when a seizure is prolonged ("status epilepticus"). It is given intravenously.

Lyrica®

A trade name for the drug pregabalin

MedicAlert® pendant

A small bracelet/necklace worn to advise that the person has a specific medical condition, including epilepsy.

midazolam

Generic name for the drug Hypnovel®

monotherapy

The use of a single drug in treatment.

motor seizures

Seizures which begin with localised movements of the body.

MRI scan

Magnetic Resonance Imaging. A hi-tech test used to obtain highly defined images of the brain.

myoclonic seizures

Seizures typified by strong muscular jerks.

myoclonus, benign infantile

Muscular jerks in infants occurring when the child is awake or asleep.

myoclonus, sleep

Muscular jerks during sleep. They are not seizures.

mysoline

The generic name for the drug Primidone®.

narcolepsy

Continually and suddenly falling asleep. Not connected with epilepsy.

neurologist

A doctor specialising in neurological disorders of adults, including epilepsy.

neurologist, paediatric

A doctor specialising in neurological disorders of children, including epilepsy.

Neurontin®

A trade name of the drug gabapentin

neonatal seizures

Seizures in newly born infants.

night terrors

Severe nightmares occurring in children, sometimes mistaken as being epilepsy.

nocturnal seizures

Seizures which occur when the person is asleep.

non-convulsive seizures

Epileptic seizures which do not involve any convulsive movements.

NEAD

Non Epileptic Attack Disorder. Events occur which resemble epileptic seizures but in fact not related to epilepsy. These events are vary often of psychological origin.

occipital lobe seizures

Seizures arising from the occipital lobe of the brain.

oxcarbazepine

A generic name for the drug Trileptal®

paraldehyde

A drug used to stop prolonged seizures ("status epilepticus"). It is usually introduced rectally.

partial seizures

Seizures which initially arise in only one part of the brain.

peri-menstrual seizures

Seizures occurring around the time of menstruation.

PET scanning

Positron Emission Tomography. A newly developed hi-tech diagnostic test which can be used to identify areas of the brain that are the cause of seizures.

petit mal

The popular name given incorrectly to generalised absence seizures.

phenobarbitone

A long established antiepileptic drug now rarely prescribed as a drug of first choice

phenytoin

A generic name of the drug Epanutin®, manufactured by Parke-Davis Research Laboratories.

photosensitive epilepsy

Seizures which are provoked by a stimulus of light (usually flashing), television or certain video/computer patterns.

plasma concentration

The concentration of a drug in blood plasma.

polypharmacy or polytherapy

Using more than one drug to control seizures.

postictal period

The period of time following the cessation of a seizure.

post-traumatic epilepsy

Seizures resulting from injury to the brain.

prednisone or prednisilone

A steroid drug that may be used in certain types of epilepsy if seizures are not being controlled by the usual antiepileptic drugs.

pregabalin

A generic name for the drug Lyrica®

prevalence of epilepsy

The number of cases of epilepsy in every 1,000 of the population. In the UK it is estimated as being 130 per 1,000 population

pre-menstrual epilepsy

Seizures which occur prior to a woman's monthly period. Also called catamenial epilepsy.

primary generalised seizure

A generalised seizure without any warning symptoms.

primidone

It is the generic name of the drug Mysoline®.

prognosis

The future outlook.

Prominal®

A trade name for the drug phenobarbitone,

prophylactic medicine

Medicine which is given to prevent the occurrence of a problem rather than to treat it when it occurs.

pseudo seizures

Convulsive movements which resemble an epileptic seizure but which are not, in fact, epileptic. See NEAD

psychomotor seizures

Seizures which arise from the temporal lobe of the brain.

rectal medication

The introduction of drugs directly via the rectum.

reflex epilepsies

Seizures which are provoked by a specific stimulus, e.g. flashing lights, reading, eating.

refractory epilepsy

epilepsy that is unresponsive to treatment

remission

A period without seizures , usually greater than a year

Rivotril®

A trade name for the drug clonazepam

rufinamide

The generic name for the drug Inovelon®

Sabril®

The trade name for the drug vigabatrin

salaam attacks

Seizures occurring in infants and also called infantile spasms. The infant's head suddenly and forcefully bends forward while the knees bend and the arms flex, or extend.

secondarily generalised seizures

Seizures in which the progression is from being partial (either simple or complex) at the outset, to becoming generalised in their conclusion.

seizure

Another word for "fit" or "convulsion."

sensory seizures

Seizures which are associated with sensations or feelings such as tingling or warmth in one part of the body, or with an unusual taste, or with abdominal pain/discomfort.

serum levels

Measurements of drug levels in blood serum.

simple partial seizures

Seizures which affect only one part of the body (e.g. one side of the face or one limb, or one side of the body) and in which consciousness is normal or unimpaired.

sodium valproate

The generic name of the antiepileptic drug Epilim®.

sodium valproate modified release

The generic name for the drug Epilim Chrono®

S.O.S Talisman

Jewellery showing medical information details.

spike/wave activity

Findings on the EEG which are typical of some forms of epileptic activity.

status epilepticus

A dangerous condition where one seizure follows another without the person regaining consciousness or in which the seizure is prolonged.

stesolid

A preparation of the drug diazepam. It is administered rectally in the treatment of status epilepticus.

symptomatic epilepsy

Seizures which are a symptom of some underlying brain disorder.

syncopal attacks

Simple faints, sometimes misinterpreted as being epilepsy.

Tegretol®

A trade name for the drug carbamazepine

Tegretol Retard®

A trade name for the drug carbamazepine modified release

telemetry

Simultaneous video and EEG recordings of a patient.

temporal lobe seizures

Seizures arising from the temporal lobe of the brain, otherwise known as complex partial seizures.

teratogenic effects

The effects that a drug may have on a developing foetus.

tiagabine

The generic name for the drug Gabitril®

tonic seizures

Seizures where the body goes stiff. They are similar to tonic-clonic seizures but there is no clonic (i.e. jerking) phase.

tonic-clonic seizures

Popularly known as grand mal seizures. The tonic phase is when the body goes stiff and is followed by the clonic phase, where the body convulses or jerks.

trauma

Injury

triggers

Events which can provoke seizures, e.g. fatigue, menstrual cycle, poor compliance, flashing lights or alcohol.

Valium®

A trade name of the drug diazepam.

valproic acid

The generic name for the drug Convulex®

vigabatrin

The generic name of the antiepileptic drug Sabril®

visual seizures

Seizures accompanied by abnormal vision or by visual hallucinations.

Wada Test

A test administered by a clinical neuropsychologist to establish suitability for epilepsy surgery.

withdrawal seizures

Seizures which occur as medication is withdrawn, the person having been free of seizures whilst taking effective antiepileptic medication. Also seen after suddenly stopping some drugs of addiction, for instance alcohol or benzodiazepines.

Zarontin®

A trade name of the drug ethosuximide

Zonegran®

The trade name for the drug zonisamide

zonisamide

The generic name for the drug Zonegran®

The Association is grateful to Benefitwise, Santander, the Yorkshire Building Society and The Morrisons's Foundation for their generous support

