

# Epilepsy: Myth vs. Reality

*Separating fact from fiction about epilepsy*



**Myth:** You are born with epilepsy.

**Reality:** Genetics can play a role similar to other risk factors like stroke, head trauma or brain tumor. Epilepsy can begin at any age and in about 75% of cases, the cause is unknown.

**Myth:** Seizures always involve convulsions and violent shaking.

**Reality:** Many types of seizures have been classified and are divided into focal (start in a part of the brain) and generalized (the whole brain is involved in the electrical storm from the beginning). Symptoms range from a blank stare to tonic-clonic seizures, which are also called convulsions. The most common seizure type is focal.

**Myth:** Epilepsy is a mental problem and people with it are emotionally unstable or developmentally delayed.

**Reality:** Epilepsy is an electrical disorder of the brain, not a mental one. Often called “electrical storms” of the brain, seizures are the hallmark of epilepsy. Seizures do not affect a person’s intelligence.

**Myth:** If someone is having a seizure, you should stick something in their mouth.

**Reality:** It’s physically impossible to swallow your tongue during a seizure, so do not force anything into their mouth. The correct first aid is “Stay. Safe. Side.” Stay with them. Keep them safe. Turn them on their side.

**Myth:** If you have epilepsy, you can’t play sports.

**Reality:** The goal of treating epilepsy is seizure freedom which allows participating in activities like sports. Consult with your doctor, but don’t sideline yourself or your child.

**Myth:** Epilepsy is contagious.

**Reality:** Although there is no cure, epilepsy can’t be contracted from someone who has the disorder.

**Myth:** Flashing lights from a movie or video game are a common cause of epileptic seizures.

**Reality:** Seizure triggers (things that make seizures more likely to occur) can be different for each person. The more common triggers include missed medication, poor sleep, illness with fever and stress. Only about 5% of people with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy (seizures triggered by certain lights or video images).

**Myth:** There are no effective treatments for epilepsy.

**Reality:** The majority of people with epilepsy have seizures controlled with prescription medication. For those unable to maintain freedom from seizures, options include surgery, devices and investigational medications. As a level 4 Epilepsy Center, UT Southwestern uses advanced technology to provide the most comprehensive approach to treating epilepsy. [Learn more.](#)