

- Epilepsy is the most common serious neurological disorder.
- 10% of the population will experience a seizure of some type during their lifetime.
- 2 – 4% of the population will develop epilepsy by the age of 80.
- There are more than 40 different types of seizures.
- Anyone can develop epilepsy regardless of their age, sex, race, social group or ability, often for no apparent reason.
- Epilepsy frequently starts in childhood and also in later life due to, for example, strokes or dementia.
- Epilepsy is not contagious.
- The word 'epilepsy' comes from the Greek *epi lambano* meaning 'a taking hold of' – hence the word seizure.
- Many famous figures have had epilepsy including Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Vincent Van Gogh. More recently the actor Danny Glover, Hugo Weaving and Henry Winkler.

Most people still do not have a good understanding of what it means to have epilepsy, even though it is one of the three most common chronic conditions, the others being asthma and diabetes. Public ignorance and misconceptions about epilepsy have led to fear and prejudice.

If you have been diagnosed as having epilepsy, it is important to educate yourself and those around you about your condition. Being informed about the condition, knowing the medical terms and how to handle any problems helps reduce the impact epilepsy may have on your life.

## What causes epilepsy

In only about 30% of cases the cause can be found. This is called **symptomatic** or organic epilepsy.

These causes can include:

- Trauma to the foetus during pregnancy or birth (lack of oxygen)
- Poisoning (lead poisoning, environmental contaminants)
- Brain infection, meningitis, encephalitis, brain abscesses
- Head trauma – injury to the brain at any time of life (car accident or blow to the head)
- Stroke (injury to part of the brain caused by blockage or haemorrhage of one of its blood vessels)
- Blood chemical abnormalities, eg. low calcium, magnesium or glucose
- Hereditary disease, eg. tuberose sclerosis
- Febrile convulsions
- Congenital malformation of the brain
- Tumors (rarely in children)

The remaining 70% of people with epilepsy have **idiopathic** epilepsy, which means there is no known cause, but is presumed to be more widespread chemical changes in the brain, the nature of which is unknown. In approximately 30% of these cases the epilepsy is thought to be inherited and includes especially some of the childhood generalised epilepsies.

### References:

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