

51 Bawtry Road Doncaster DN4 7AA Tel: 01302 534999 Fax: 01302 534118
E-mail: beechwood@genus-plc.com www.beechwoodvet.co.uk

Factsheet About Epilepsy

If you have witnessed your dog having a seizure (convulsion), you will know how frightening it can be. Seizures are not uncommon in dogs, but many dogs have only a single seizure. If your dog has had more than one seizure it may be that he (she) is epileptic. Just as in people, there are medications for dogs which control seizures, allowing your dog to live a more normal life.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy means repeated seizures due to abnormal activity in the brain. It is caused by an abnormality in the brain itself. If seizures occur because of a problem elsewhere in the body, for example heart disease, which stops oxygen reaching the brain, this is not epilepsy. Tests to try to find the reason for the epilepsy are performed but in many cases no cause can be identified. Epilepsy affects around 4 in every hundred dogs. In some breeds it can be passed through the generations and may be more common in particular families.

What happens during a seizure?

Some dogs seem to know when they are about to have a seizure and may behave in a certain way. You will come to recognise these signs as meaning that a seizure is likely. Often dogs just seek out their owner's company and come to sit beside them when a seizure is about to start.

Once the seizure starts the dog is unconscious - they cannot hear or respond to you. Most dogs become stiff, fall onto their side and make running movements with their legs. Sometimes they will cry out and may lose control of their bowels or bladder. Most seizures last between 1 and 3 minutes - it is worth making a note of the time the seizure starts and ends because it often seems that a seizure goes on for a lot longer than it really does.

After a seizure dogs behave in different ways. Some dogs just get up and carry on with what they were doing, while others appear dazed and confused for up to 24 hours afterwards. However most often dogs will show disorientation for only 10-15 minutes before returning to their usual self.

Dogs often have a set pattern of behaviour that they follow after every seizure - for example going for a drink of water or asking to go outside to the toilet. If your dog has had more than one seizure you may well start to notice a pattern of behaviour, which is typically repeated in any subsequent seizures.

Veterinary Surgeons: Mr J Hammill, Ms L McLean, Mr E Rouvière, Mr M A Straw, Ms C E Wilde

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When will seizures occur?

Most epileptic seizures will occur while your dog is relaxed and resting quietly. It is very rare for a seizure to occur at exercise. Often seizures occur in the evening or at night. In a few dogs seizures seem to be triggered by particular events or stress. It is common for a pattern to develop, which you will recognise as specific to your dog. However in some epileptic animals seizures continue to be unpredictable.

What should I do while my dog is having a seizure?

The most important thing is to stay calm. Remember that your dog is unconscious during the seizure and is not in pain or distressed. The seizure itself is likely to be more distressing for you than your pet. Make sure that your dog is not in a position to injure himself, for example by falling down the stairs, but otherwise do not try to interfere with him. Never try to put your hand inside his mouth during a seizure as you are very likely to get bitten.

Will the seizure harm my dog?

Seizures can cause damage to the brain and if your dog has repeated seizures these make it more likely that further seizures will occur. The damage caused by seizures is cumulative and after a lot of seizures there may be enough brain damage to cause early senility (with loss of learned behaviour and housetraining or behavioural changes). It is very rare for dogs to injure themselves during a seizure. Occasionally a dog may bite its tongue and there may appear to be a lot of blood but it is unlikely to be serious; your dog will not swallow its tongue.

If a seizure goes on for a very long time (more than 10 minutes), body temperature will rise and this can cause damage to other organs such as the liver and kidneys as well as the brain. Very occasionally dogs will be left in a coma after severe seizures.

When should I contact my vet?

When your dog starts a seizure make a note of the time. If your dog comes out of the seizure within 5 minutes then allow him time to recover quietly. If this is the first seizure your dog has had you should bring your dog for a routine appointment for an examination and to commence investigations. It is far better for your dog to recover quietly at home rather than be rushed in to see us immediately. Indeed this may trigger further seizures. However, if your dog does not come out of the seizure within 5 minutes, or has repeated seizures close together, then you should contact us immediately, as we will want to see your dog as soon as possible.

How will my vet know what is wrong with my dog?

There are many things besides epilepsy, which cause seizures in dogs. When we first examine your dog, we will not know whether your dog has epilepsy or another condition. It is unlikely that we will see your dog during an episode so it is vital that you are able to describe in detail what happens. You might want to make notes or, if you have a video camera, take a film of your dog during the event to show to us. A good description will help us decide if your pet is having a seizure or collapsing for some other reason.

Epilepsy, most commonly, starts in dogs between 1 and 5 years of age, so if your dog is outside this age range then it is more likely that he has a different problem. We may need

to run a whole range of tests to ensure that there is no other cause of the seizures. These include blood tests, possibly X-rays, and we may even recommend a scan (MRI) of your dog's brain. If no other cause can be found, a diagnosis of epilepsy may then be made.

It is rare for epileptic dogs to stop having seizures altogether. However, with appropriate medication and monitoring there is a good chance that they will live a full and happy life.