



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Responding to Seizures

National Epilepsy Awareness Month — November 2015

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[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[Dr. Moore] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly feature of the *MMWR*, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm Dr. Latetia Moore, filling in for your host, Dr. Robert Gaynes.

Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes recurrent seizures. As traumatic as epilepsy can be for the person experiencing seizures, it can be just as troubling for witnesses who want to try and help.

Rosemarie Kobau is a researcher with CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. She's joining us today to discuss the appropriate way to help someone who's experiencing a seizure. Welcome to the show, Rosemarie.

[Rosemarie Kobau] Thank you, Latetia. It's a pleasure to be here.

[Dr. Moore] Rosemarie, how common is epilepsy in the U.S.?

[Rosemarie Kobau] Nearly three million people in the United States have epilepsy. About 2.4 million adults and about 460,000 in the U.S. have the disorder, and while anyone can develop epilepsy, children and older adults are at highest risk of developing this disorder.

[Dr. Moore] What causes it?

[Rosemarie Kobau] Epilepsy can be caused by different conditions that affect a person's brain, and causes of epilepsy vary by age. So, for example, in newborns, brain malformations, lack of oxygen during birth, and even maternal drug use can result in epilepsy. In infants and children, infections and genetic factors play a role. In children and adults, head injuries and brain tumors are common causes of epilepsy. And in seniors, stroke and Alzheimer's disease can result in epilepsy.

[Dr. Moore] Is there a cure for epilepsy?

[Rosemarie Kobau] We don't have a cure for epilepsy yet, but there are effective treatments that can help people control their seizures.

[Dr. Moore] Rosemarie, what are the signs that someone is having a seizure?

[Rosemarie Kobau] The most common types of seizures are partial seizures and during a partial seizure a person might suddenly stop in the middle of a sentence and stare blankly, they might be unable to speak for a few seconds, they might get up and walk around during the seizure but they're not really in control of where they're going (it's like they're not paying attention), some might move their mouth like they want to say something but can't, and sometimes people might actually repeat a word or phrase that they're sort of stuck on, sometimes a person might look like they're making hand gestures (sort of like they're picking at their clothes or at the air). And these seizures can last between about one to two minutes, but sometimes they're so brief and subtle that other people don't even notice. The other type of seizures are called generalized seizures and these are what people used to call grand mal seizures, and

the type of seizure people think about most when they think about epilepsy. So during a generalized seizure, a person's muscles might stiffen; air being forced out of the vocal chords causes a cry or a groan; someone might fall to the floor; a person might bite their tongue or cheek, turn a little bit blue in the face; arms and legs might sort of jerk rapidly and rhythmically, bending and relaxing at the elbows, hips, and knees. But after a few minutes, that jerking—the body movement—slows and stops and consciousness returns slowly and the person certainly can be drowsy, confused, a little bit agitated, because they really aren't aware of what happened. And these seizures generally last between about one to three minutes.

[Dr. Moore] What should we do if we witness someone having a seizure?

[Rosemarie Kobau] So the most important thing to do is to keep the person safe and comfortable. So again, the first response is to provide care and comfort. Stay calm. Help others stay calm. Most seizures only last a few minutes but do pay attention to how long the seizure lasts. For someone having a generalized seizure, if they are risk of falling, ease them gently to the floor. Turn the person—again, gently—onto one side and this will help the person breath. Clear the area around the person of anything hard or sharp to prevent injury. Put something soft and flat, like a folded jacket, under their head, and call 911 if the seizure lasts longer that five minutes or if the person is hurt during the seizure or has another seizure right after the first one ended. For someone having a partial seizure, once the seizure starts, stay with the person and don't let them wander away. Again, keep the person safe from dangerous situations to prevent injury, but don't physically restrain the person. Stay close by and assure them that they're safe, but don't assume that they can talk or that they can follow your instructions during the seizure. Once the seizure stops, make sure that they are alert, safe, and can get home or wherever it is that they need to go, before leaving them alone. And, after any type of seizure, always talk calmly and reassuringly to the person during and after the seizure to help them recover from the seizure. Assure the person that they are safe.

[Dr. Moore] Where can listeners get more information about epilepsy?

[Rosemarie Kobau] Listeners can go to cdc.gov/epilepsy to learn more about the disorder and first aid response

[Dr. Moore] Thanks, Rosemarie. I've been talking today with CDC's Rosemarie Kobau about the appropriate way to respond a person who's having a seizure.

When seeking to help, remain calm, help the person lie on their side on the floor, cushion the head, and remove objects that could possibly cause injury. If the seizure continues for more than five minutes, call 911.

Until next time, be well. This is Dr. Latetia Moore for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO.