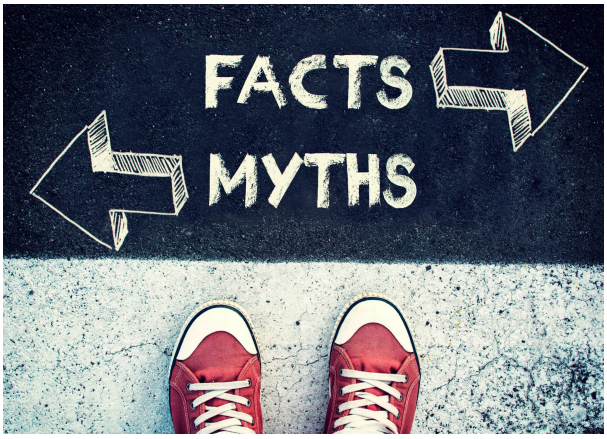
EPILEPSY NEW ZEALAND
Kia titiro ki te tangata | See the person

Myths and Misconceptions



Epilepsy-related myths (false belief or idea) still exist in the community. Unfortunately, a lack of awareness about epilepsy can contribute to stigma and discrimination. It can also make some people uncomfortable to talk about their epilepsy, even when they want or need to.

Below we challenge some common epilepsy myths that still exist today.

MYTH 1: ALL PEOPLE WITH EPILEPSY LOSE CONSCIOUSNESS AND HAVE CONVULSIONS

The most common seizure we see on TV is called a 'tonic-clonic seizure'. This is where a person falls to the ground and starts to shake (and often in movies and TV they begin to foam at the mouth, but this is not always the case!). In fact, tonic-clonic seizures are one of over 40 different seizure types, some of which include quick muscle twitches, a brief loss of awareness, confusion or disorientation. A convulsive seizure was previously called a *fit*.

MYTH 2: EPILEPSY IS A LIFE SENTENCE

Epilepsy is not necessarily a lifelong condition. While there is currently no cure for epilepsy, some childhood epilepsy syndromes are 'outgrown' and around 70% of people with epilepsy will become seizure free with medication. Epilepsy is considered to be 'resolved' in some people who have not had a seizure in 10 years and been able to stop medication for the last five of those years.

MYTH 3: EPILEPSY IS A MENTAL ILLNESS

Sometimes epilepsy and seizures can be mistaken for mental illness. For example, a person may make unusual noises, use strange words and/or behave oddly when having a seizure. However, like anyone else, some people with epilepsy can develop mental health conditions, such as depression and/or anxiety. Click here for more information about mental health and wellbeing.

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MYTH 4: IF YOU HAVE EPILEPSY, YOU CAN'T DRIVE

People with epilepsy can obtain a driver license if their seizures are well-controlled with medication, or if they fulfill the guidelines set out by the relevant driving authority in their state. Click here for more information about epilepsy and driving.

MYTH 5: YOU SHOULD RESTRAIN SOMEONE HAVING A SEIZURE

Restraining someone during a seizure is more likely to agitate or harm that person (or you). A seizure will run its course and restraining someone will not stop or slow it down. Seizure first aid depends on the type of seizure. Click here for more information about seizure first aid.

MYTH 6: YOU SHOULD PUT SOMETHING IN A PERSON'S MOUTH TO STOP THEM SWALLOWING THEIR TONGUE DURING A SEIZURE

It is physically impossible to swallow your tongue. Do NOT put something in their mouth, as the person is unable to control their muscle movements during a seizure and they may bite down on the object and break their teeth, or injure their mouth/jaw (you may also harm yourself in the process). Click here for more information about seizure first aid.

MYTH 7: IF SOMEONE HAS A SEIZURE THEY HAVE TO GO TO HOSPITAL

Not all seizures require hospitalisation. Most often, the person will just need time to rest and recover after a seizure, which they might be able to do at work, school or home. If you don't know the person and witness them having a seizure, it is best to call for an ambulance (dial 111). Click here for more information about seizure first aid.