Diagnosis



The doctor will seek as much information as possible about the seizure (or suspected seizure, particularly if there is no history of seizures). The doctor will ask for a description of what happened, and what the seizure looked like. If a family member or friend witnessed the event, it can be helpful to bring them to the appointment with you.

If you aren't comfortable having someone come into the appointment with you, you can bring written, recorded or filmed information with you. You can read more about collecting information about seizures on our website.

The doctor may ask questions about your family's medical background or any pre-existing and other medical conditions you might have. The doctor may also want information about your birth and early childhood.

The doctor may order a variety of tests. Sometimes the doctor will have enough information after the first appointment to recommend or start treatment, but generally this will only take place after your test results are assessed.

Tests and investigations that are often used to diagnose epilepsy include:

- Physical examination
- Pathology tests
- Electroencephalogram (EEG)
- Computed tomography (CT)
- Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI).

Sometimes it is very clear why a person has experienced a seizure. But occasionally, even after tests and a thorough examination of the person's medical history, it is still not possible to make a clear diagnosis. This can be frustrating.

Other existing disabilities and health conditions can also make the diagnosis of epilepsy more complex. There are many other medical conditions and behaviours which may cause events that resemble seizures. These can include fainting, weakness in limbs, migraines, dizziness, panic attacks, confusion, psychiatric behaviours, and sleep disturbances. Also, repetitive behaviours or movements associated with certain disabilities, such as cognitive impairments, may be mistaken for seizure-related activity.

Often it is a matter of waiting for a definite answer from the doctor or medical team. More seizure activity may result in a clear diagnosis, or a further test may help to provide an answer. Doctors prefer to conduct a thorough investigation to avoid an incorrect diagnosis and prescribe inappropriate treatment. The diagnosis of epilepsy can have a social and emotional impact on you, in both challenging and empowering ways. Having a diagnosis means that you will be in a better position to explore treatment options and consider necessary lifestyle adjustments, as well as discuss your epilepsy with family, friends and others in your social network.

Watch Epilepsy New Zealand video Diagnosing Epilepsy

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