

EPILEPSY IN DOGS- PETS HAVE SEIZURES?

“I awoke to a commotion on the bedroom floor and flipped on the light. My black lab Ernie was stretched out stiff, legs jerking. His lips were pulled back in a terrible grimace. His flailing seemed to go on forever though it probably lasted less than a minute. Ernie then seemed to wake up, looking dazed. I petted and reassured him but I had no idea what had happened. When I called my veterinarian the next day, I learned that dogs can suffer from epilepsy.”



In fact, dogs are the most common domestic animal to be affected by epilepsy. In fact, over the years, estimates for the prevalence of epilepsy in dogs in the U.S. have ranged from about 0.55 percent to 5 percent. That could mean that about two million dogs are affected.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is when a patient has two or more seizures, regardless of cause. In dogs, the four main categories of epilepsy are:

- **Genetic, formerly called idiopathic or primary:** The new name acknowledges that a genetic cause is highly suspect. The Canine Epilepsy Network, part of the Canine Genetic Diseases Network, is one collaboration working to identify the responsible genes so the hereditary form can be properly diagnosed and steps taken to decrease the incidence.
- **Structural:** A specific brain disease is present such as a tumor, infection, stroke, or injury.
- **Reactive or metabolic:** A problem in the dog's metabolism, such as liver disease or hypoglycemia, has a negative effect on the brain.
- **Undetermined or cryptogenic cause:** This term is usually reserved for older patients (more than 7 years old) who start having seizures with no specific underlying cause.

The prognosis depends on the underlying cause. If there is a known cause, treatments might include surgery, radiation therapy, or antibiotics. In about 75 percent of dogs with epilepsy, the seizures can be controlled with a widening variety of medications.

Unfortunately, at this time, there is no cure for genetic epilepsy in dogs. Treatment usually involves daily medication to try to decrease the frequency and severity of the seizures. Commonly used drugs include phenobarbital, zonisamide, levetiracetam, and bromide.

SunShine Animal Hospital Client Education Series

What to do if your dog is having a seizure

Try to move the dog if he is near the top of the stairs, near a swimming pool, or in another potentially dangerous area, says Thomas. If the dog is on a hard surface, like concrete, place a towel or thin blanket under his head.

What you should NOT do may be more important.

Do NOT try to pick up a seizing dog, unless the seizure does not stop and you must transport the dog to your veterinarian or emergency hospital.

Do NOT try to hold the dog in an upright position. Allow the dog to lay on her side so any saliva runs out of her mouth and doesn't pool in the back of her throat.

Do NOT try to reach into the animal's mouth or give any medication by mouth during a seizure. It is a myth and is anatomically impossible for a dog to swallow her tongue during a seizure, says Thomas.

Most seizures stop spontaneously in one to three minutes. If an active seizure has not stopped within minutes, you need to get the pet to a veterinarian. Always call to let us know you're on your way with your seizing pet.

What might be ahead for the epileptic dog?

That depends on several variables, including the cause, seizure type, frequency, and response to therapy. If your dog can be diagnosed early in his disease onset, treated appropriately, and monitored effectively during treatment, he can enjoy a good life of an average lifespan.

Owners should talk first to the veterinarian. We can obtain a medical history, perform an examination, and, in some cases, perform laboratory tests to get a diagnosis and discuss treatment options.”

Referral to a board-certified veterinary neurologist may be recommended in certain cases.

There are several online support groups for people with epileptic pets:

Canine Epilepsy Network

Canine Epilepsy Resources

The Epi Guardian Angels