

# Epilepsy at school



## What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a chronic disorder characterized by seizures. Seizures are abnormal bursts of electrical activity in the brain that results in a change in behaviour and/or function.

Epilepsy affects approximately 1 in 100 Canadian children and youth. Parents and caregivers should provide teachers and support staff with the information they need to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students with epilepsy.

## What are epileptic seizures?

Not all seizures are the same. Signs and symptoms can include:

- Temporary confusion
- An extended blank stare
- Uncontrollable jerking body movements

- Loss of consciousness or awareness, sometimes with loss of bladder control

Most seizures last less than 5 minutes.

Certain situations can bring on a seizure in some people with epilepsy. Common triggers include not taking medication, tiredness, lack of sleep, stress, fever, and alcohol and drugs.

The best way to manage epilepsy is by taking medication and avoiding triggers.

## How does epilepsy affect a child in school?

Students with epilepsy have the same range of abilities as those who do not live with epilepsy. When managed effectively, and with support and planning, students with epilepsy should be encouraged to participate in all school activities.

Social anxiety and stigma around epilepsy are common. This can often be more harmful to a student's quality of life at school than the condition itself.

Managing epilepsy at school is important. Some families may worry that their child won't have the proper support to deal with epilepsy at school. They wonder:

- Will my child be excluded from activities?
- Can my child go on field trips?
- Is my child safe during the day? What happens if they have a seizure?

Most children and youth living with epilepsy will not have any other neurological conditions. Some students may need extra support at school due to difficulties with learning, behaviour and/or mobility.

Some children may occasionally be more sleepy than usual due to a recent medication adjustment. This should be temporary.

## Is there support for students with epilepsy in schools?

It is very important that schools know when a student has epilepsy. School staff should also have access to reliable information on epilepsy. Your local epilepsy association can be a great source of information.

All students with epilepsy – no matter how independent they are – need the support of caring adults within the school setting. Seizures can happen quickly, so it's important that school staff are educated, equipped and available to support students.

Support for students with epilepsy in schools varies across Canada. Resources and policies are different across the country, even among schools in the same city or the same school board. The level of teacher support will depend on your child's age and stage of development, and the severity of their epilepsy.

## What are the responsibilities of a parent or guardian and the school?

Supporting children and youth with epilepsy at school should be a shared responsibility between families, schools, and as needed, a health care provider. Older children should also be included in these responsibilities.

Although parents or guardians are responsible for the daily management decisions around their child's epilepsy (e.g., medications and dosage), school staff should be equipped (and trained, as needed) to provide the student with reliable hands-on support and supervision. This can often be communicated through a seizure action plan.

Ongoing communication between the school and the student's family is crucial, especially if there are changes to the student's medical condition.

## What is a seizure action plan?

Each school year, parents should develop a detailed seizure action plan for their child (or *with* their child if they are old enough to be involved in the process). This can be done in consultation with the child's health care provider. The plan should be reviewed and updated regularly.

A seizure action plan may include:

- Roles and responsibilities of everyone involved in the student's well-being.
- Detailed information about the child's epilepsy.
- A daily epilepsy management plan.
- What to do in case of a seizure.
- Special instructions for the use of rescue medications, used in case of emergency.
- If, and when to call an ambulance.

The plan should be provided to all administrative staff, teachers, and anyone who is in contact with the student on a regular basis. It should also be available during bus rides, field trips, or sporting events.

## What seizure first aid basics should school staff know?

School staff should:

- place the student on their side, in recovery position,
- time the seizure,
- prevent injury (removing any unsafe objects),
- never put anything in the student's mouth,
- call 911 if a seizure lasts longer than 5 minutes, and
- refer to the student's seizure action plan.

## What should my child's classmates know about epilepsy?

Children and youth may worry about answering questions from classmates. How to explain

epilepsy to students depends on their age and level of understanding.

Having an information session can teach your child's classmates about epilepsy and can help to create a supportive environment. Make sure to ask your child if they feel comfortable with an information session for their classroom. Some children and youth may want to be a part of this education about their condition, but others may not.

For educational materials or presentations for school staff or students, you can contact local support groups or epilepsy associations, school support nurses, or your child's health care provider.

*Thank you to the Neurology Department at the IWK Health Centre for the guidance and expertise in the development of this resource.*

### Additional resources

Edmonton Epilepsy Association: Educational information booklets  
<https://edmontonepilepsy.org/information-booklets/>

Canadian Epilepsy Alliance: Find your local office  
<https://www.canadianepilepsyalliance.org/find-your-local-office/>

AboutKidsHealth: Epilepsy at school  
<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/Article?contentid=2116&language=English>

Epilepsy Ontario: Training modules and videos for educators  
<https://epilepsyontario.org/at-work-school/epilepsy-and-education/for-educators/>



*Development of this resource was supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Pendopharm, Division of Pharmascience Inc.*