



Seizures in Cats

Seizures and epilepsy are less common in cats than dogs. They are, however, the most common sign of disease affecting the front part of the brain in the cat.

Some important terms:

Term	Description
Seizure	Convulsion, ictus, fit - an involuntary disturbance of normal brain control that is usually seen as uncontrollable muscle activity. Seizures can be single or may occur in clusters, and can be very infrequent or may occur at regular intervals
Epilepsy	Recurrent seizures
Preictal	Aura - the change in character that occurs prior to a fit e.g. nervousness, attention seeking, head turning
Postictal	It can take 24-48 hours for a cat to return to its normal state after a seizure. This abnormal period is called the Postictal Phase and is characterized by a variety of signs including sleepiness, pacing, depression, excitement, excessive eating and drinking
Generalized seizures	Grand mal seizure - jerking movements, rigid limbs, paddling/running movements, loss of fecal and urinary control. The head is often bent backwards along the spine.
Status epilepticus	Continuous seizures for more than 5-10 minutes. Cats in status epilepticus require urgent treatment.
Partial seizures	Very rare in cats. May involve only certain muscle groups or be characterized by behavioral changes (e.g. tail chasing, biting at imaginary objects, aggression).
Absence seizures	<i>Petit mal</i> seizure – minor seizure activity very rarely recognized in cats. Often described as “not being aware of surroundings; a brief loss of awareness.”

Seizures often occur at times of changing brain activity such as during phases of sleep, excitement or feeding. Affected cats can appear completely normal between seizures. Many different diseases can lead to seizures so it is important that diagnostic tests are performed to discover the underlying cause of the seizures. Treatment of the underlying disease is most likely to lead to successful control of the seizures. In cats, idiopathic or non-specific epilepsy, which occurs commonly in dogs, is rare.

How can I help my veterinarian to diagnose epilepsy?

By carefully observing your cat during a seizure, you can provide valuable information to your veterinarian about the types of disease that may be causing the problem. Information about your cat's lifestyle and history may also be important, including:

1. What age did the seizures begin and are they getting worse?
2. Are the seizures intermittent or did they develop suddenly?
3. What is the frequency and duration of seizures?
4. Are there any associations of seizures with sleep, excitement, feeding, etc.?
5. Are there any other signs of illness such as poor appetite, excessive drinking, reduced exercise, etc.?
6. Has the cat received any medications recently, especially deworming or flea control products?
7. What diet and nutritional supplements are given?
8. Has there been any access or exposure to poisons or toxins?

Both diseases that involve the brain directly (intracranial) and conditions that affect other body systems (extracranial), especially liver or kidney disease, can cause seizures. With recent developments in treatment, many diseases that were previously untreatable may now be treated, although this can require referral to a specialist center.



How can the cause of the seizures be diagnosed?

A range of tests is often needed before a final diagnosis can be made. Initially, this is likely to involve blood samples to look for extracranial causes. Following this a general anesthetic may be required to allow x-rays of the skull to be taken and the fluid that surrounds the brain (cerebrospinal fluid) sampled. In order to actually look at the brain, powerful imaging techniques are required. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computer-assisted tomography (CT) are the most commonly performed diagnostic tests. These tests are only available at a limited number of specialist centers.

How are the seizures treated?

It is important that a cat having regular seizures (more than one every six to eight weeks) receives treatment even if the cause is not understood, because each seizure can lead to further brain damage and increase the likelihood of more severe seizures and complications. In cases where the cause of the convulsions is unknown or is untreatable, the seizures will need to be treated directly. A variety of treatments are available. The treatment chosen will depend on each individual case and specific needs. Several changes of drug dose, frequency and type of drug may be required before the regime that suits your cat best is found.

This can be a frustrating time but finding the right treatment is important for your cat's long-term well-being. Even with treatment it may not be possible to completely prevent seizures. In many cases the aim is to reduce the seizures so your cat can lead a more or less normal life.

Golden rules of seizure treatment

ALWAYS follow the instructions on the label. Both the dose and timing of the medication are important to maintain adequate drug levels in the bloodstream.

NEVER run out of the medication as sudden withdrawal of treatment can lead to serious seizures.

INFORM your veterinarian when your supply is running low so a refill prescription can be arranged. This is particularly important if the treatment needs to be ordered specially for your cat.

KEEP these drugs safe and away from children, as they can be powerful sedatives.

BE CAREFUL about other medications, including herbs and supplements, that you give your cat. If in doubt, check with your veterinarian before giving your cat anything.

What are the side effects of treatment?

Mild side effects are common, particularly at the beginning of treatment or following changes in the regime. The most common side-effect is sedation or lethargy but other signs can also occur, most disappear quite rapidly as the cat becomes used to the medication. If side effects persist or seem severe, the veterinary practice should be informed.



DO NOT CHANGE THE DOSE OR TIMING OF MEDICATION WITHOUT CONSULTING YOUR VETERINARIAN FIRST

Why is my cat still seizing after we started the medication?

Sometimes treatment will appear to have failed, especially during the first month or two. In many cases this is because the dosage and timing of the medication is not yet right. Please check that you are following the instructions on the medication label correctly. In some cases your veterinarian may take a blood sample to ensure that your cat has adequate circulating blood levels of the medication.

Other causes of treatment failure include:

1. Specific circumstances such as stress - increased medication may be required during such periods.
2. Progression or worsening of the disease.
3. Some cases are uncontrollable even with medication.

Seizures in cats are generally a sign of fairly severe disease; however, this does not mean that nothing can be done for your cat. With the correct treatment, the quality of your cat's life can often be dramatically improved.

This client information sheet is based on material written by Ernest Ward, DVM
© Copyright 2005 Lifelearn Inc. Used with permission under license. April 11, 2014