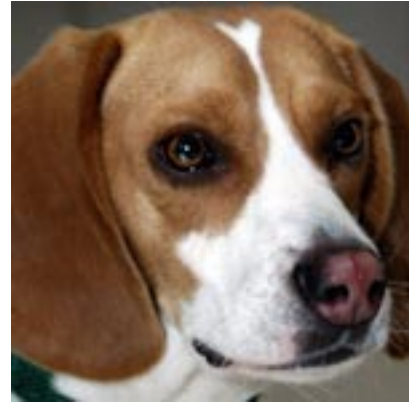


# Living with an Epileptic Pet

By Virginia Clemans, DVM

Seizures or epilepsy occurs when there is a short-circuit or irritation in the brain. This can be one of the most frightening and confusing health problems that can affect your pet. When a prolonged seizure occurs, the dog or cat can experience difficulty breathing, high body temperature, brain damage, and even death. Therefore, a seizure indicates a potentially life-threatening event requiring immediate attention. When your pet has a seizure, it is important to remain calm, act quickly and think clearly.



The list of possible causes of seizures or epilepsy is very long, and sometimes a specific cause cannot be found. Some of the conditions that lead to seizures are extremely difficult to diagnose and require the use of expensive medical equipment, which is not often available. Also, a seizure is typically almost completely over by the time the dog or cat reaches the animal hospital, making exactly what happened difficult to ascertain.

Since a good history is so important to the proper diagnosis and treatment of seizures, be prepared to answer these detailed questions relating to the seizure:

- Has your pet been exposed to any potentially toxic substances, such as antifreeze, insect or rodent poisons, or household cleaning products?
- How long did the seizure last? (Seizures always seem to last much longer than they actually do, so glancing at a watch or clock when the seizure begins and ends is extremely helpful.)
- Did you notice any abnormal behavior immediately before or after the seizure?
- Be able to describe the seizure. What was the level of consciousness during the seizure? Was there loss of bladder or bowel control?
- Have there been any changes in your pet's personality, appetite, movement, vision or general health immediately prior to this event?
- Has any other pet (or human) in contact with your pet been ill?

Depending upon their nature, seizures can be classified as either partial or generalized seizures. Partial seizures occur when only one area of the brain is affected; generalized seizures involve larger areas of the brain. Partial seizures may appear as confusion, muscle tremors, or spasms of the face or limbs. Also, the pet may run, pace, circle, or lick or chew himself. Partial seizures can progress to generalized seizures, which usually render the pet unconscious and rigid. In a generalized seizure, the pet may paddle his limbs, make chewing motions with the jaws, salivate, and lose control of bladder or bowels.

A word of caution: An animal having a seizure can be dangerous. Since she is not aware

of her behavior, it is possible for her to bite even though she never bites under normal circumstances. It is not possible for your pet to “swallow her tongue,” so keep your hands away from her mouth, even after the seizure appears to have ended.

It may be necessary to perform blood tests, urinalysis and x-rays to assess the general health of your pet after he has had a seizure. As mentioned earlier, sometimes a cause cannot be found. If a cause is found, the seizures may end once the primary cause is treated. If no cause is found, and the seizures are frequent or increasing in frequency, your pet may be placed on anti-seizure medication. Once the seizures are under control, close monitoring by your veterinarian is essential. The medications used for seizure control in dogs and cats should always be kept out of reach of children and other pets.

*Dr. Virginia Clemans was Best Friends' chief veterinarian from 2001 to 2004. She now resides in Salt Lake City, where she is chief of staff for the Utah County Fix, a low-cost, high-volume spay/neuter and vaccine clinic sponsored by No More Homeless Pets in Utah, Maddie's Fund and Best Friends Animal Society.*