

Epilepsy

WHAT IS IT?

Epilepsy is the most common serious neurological condition. It is the tendency to have repeated seizures and blackouts. A sudden, temporary interruption or disturbance in some or all of the nerve cells on the brain (neurones) results in a seizure. A seizure can also be caused by temporary lack of oxygen or glucose although this is more rare. Seizures tend to start in infancy or by late adolescence and the likelihood rises once more after the age of 65. A single seizure does not mean that someone has epilepsy.

We all have the capacity to experience a seizure under certain conditions as part of our genetic makeup, and we all have a level of resistance to seizures. Family tendency to seizures plays an important part. However, a severe injury due to, for example, a traumatic birth or a road accident may cause epilepsy to develop.

Seizures are sometimes attributed to stress but this is not the underlying cause of epilepsy. Epilepsy is not determined by race or social class. About one in 200 children and adults have epilepsy in the UK.

Those with epilepsy may experience blackouts or periods of confused memory, episodes of staring, unexplained periods of unresponsiveness, involuntary movement of arms and legs, or fainting spells with incontinence. Excessive fatigue may follow a seizure.

Students with epilepsy often have poor self-confidence and low self esteem.

Epilepsy is covered by the Disability Discrimination Act because it is a physical impairment which for many students has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day to day activities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

Students with epilepsy may experience difficulty in sustaining attention. Short-term memory may be impaired. Concentration and attention levels may be poor. Students may be distracted by background noise in the classroom. They may also experience difficulties with problem solving, decision making, and

language skills. Hand/eye co-ordination may be poor and reaction times slow. Such students will need time to think about and answer a question. Auditory memory may be poor due to mental breaks. The student may need visual materials to supplement gaps in learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

■ Classroom management

The teacher should repeat key points and summarise at the start and end of each lesson. Students may need support to help them keep up to date with work.

■ Health and safety

Water sports, climbing, and contact sports should be carefully supervised but not avoided. Those with epilepsy should avoid

scuba diving and sky diving. On field trips or educational holidays, no limitations on travel are necessary as long as there is access to medical care.

■ Examinations

Students with epilepsy may be granted special examination provisions. These will be agreed by the examination boards according to circumstances. The special

provisions may include extra time in exams, provision for rest breaks, use of a prompt, and provision for sitting the exam in a small room. Such special provisions should be taken into account for internal tests and examinations.

■ **Be positive**

Ask the student what makes learning a positive experience for them. Remember that self esteem may be low and in need of boosting.

