Epilepsy: Sorting the myths from the facts of a common disorder

By The Conversation, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.03.17

Epilepsy is a neurological illness, meaning it is an illness of the nervous system. The nervous system is a complex network of nerves and cells. It carries messages back and forth from the brain and spinal cord to other parts of the body. People with epilepsy suffer occasional seizures, during which the brain stops operating normally.

Epilepsy is a physical illness, not a mental illness. People with epilepsy are not "crazy," they are normal, capable people. Unless someone has a major seizure in a public place, you will not know they have epilepsy. The illness causes no permanent damage to the brain, and there is no limit to what someone with the condition can accomplish.

**Epileptic Seizures Occur In The Brain**

Epilepsy is one of the most common neurological diseases, particularly among children.

When epileptic seizures occur in just one part of the brain, they can be very small and can even pass by unnoticed. When seizures involve large parts of the brain, the result is an epileptic fit.
When an epileptic fit occurs, the person’s muscles stiffen. Then, they lose consciousness and fall to the floor, and their body starts jerking rhythmically.

A seizure can be frightening for those who have never seen one before. In past centuries, epileptic seizures were misunderstood. Many believed seizures were a sign that someone was possessed by demons. Only in modern times has epilepsy been truly recognized as a disease of the brain.

**Epilepsy Often Misunderstood**

There are still misunderstandings, though. For example, some think something should be put into the mouth when someone is in the middle of a seizure. This is not a good idea, though. Also, is not true that the tongue can be “swallowed.”

However, when a person goes limp at the end of a seizure, they should be put on their side. This will prevent the floppy tongue from blocking their breathing. After a seizure, it may take some time for the person's behavior to return to normal and sleepiness is common.

**Most Epilepsy Can Be Controlled With Medication**

The causes of epilepsy are very varied. The condition can be inherited from a parent, or it can be brought on by anything from a brain tumor to an injury to the head.

In some cases, epilepsy is associated with other brain problems. Mostly, however, people with epilepsy are perfectly fine between seizures and can live their lives normally. However, those whose seizures are not controlled should not operate dangerous machinery, such as cars. They also should not swim alone.

Most epilepsy can be well controlled with medications. In some cases, the illness can be cured through an operation on the brain. In other cases, devices implanted in the brain can control severe epilepsy.
Quiz

1 Which detail BEST supports the article’s central idea?

(A) The illness causes no permanent damage to the brain, and there is no limit to what someone with the condition can accomplish.

(B) When epileptic seizures occur in just one part of the brain, they can be very small and can even pass by unnoticed.

(C) Only in modern times has epilepsy been truly recognized as a disease of the brain.

(D) Many believed seizures were a sign that someone was possessed by demons.

2 What is the summary of the section "Epilepsy Often Misunderstood"?

(A) It is necessary to put something in a person’s mouth if they are having a seizure so they do not hurt themselves.

(B) It is important to put a person on their side after a seizure, and know that it’s normal for the person to be sleepy.

(C) It is important to keep a person from swallowing their tongue if they are having a seizure.

(D) It is necessary to offer a person support if they go limp when they are having a seizure.

3 Read the paragraph from the section "Epileptic Seizures Occur In The Brain."

*When an epileptic fit occurs, the person’s muscles stiffen. Then, they lose consciousness and fall to the floor, and their body starts jerking rhythmically.*

Which option is the BEST definition of the word "fit" as used in the sentence?

(A) rage

(B) attack

(C) craze

(D) shock
Epilepsy is a neurological illness, meaning it is an illness of the nervous system. The nervous system is a complex network of nerves and cells. It carries messages back and forth from the brain and spinal cord to other parts of the body.

Which of the following phrases from the text helps you understand the meaning of the term "network"?

(A) jerking rhythmically
(B) carries messages
(C) muscles stiffen
(D) operating normally