

Epilepsy is very common in people over the age of 60, however it can be difficult to diagnose in this age group. Many symptoms of epilepsy are similar to events associated with 'getting older', like falls and confusion, making it harder to pinpoint epilepsy as the correct diagnosis.

Clinical presentations of epilepsy can resemble other conditions including strokes, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer's disease, dementia, brain injuries or tumors.

Seizures can occur for several reasons including drug toxicity and kidney or liver failure. Diagnosis can be more difficult in older people but is helped by careful eye-witness descriptions of the events that are occurring.

Some signs to look out for that indicate possible seizure activity in someone who is ageing include:

- intermittent confusion
- suspended awareness
- sporadic memory loss
- sudden inexplicable anxiety
- unexplained single drive car accidents

Investigations including EEG and MRI scans may also be undertaken to enable medical practitioners determine the correct diagnosis.

A diagnosis of epilepsy means there is a tendency to have recurrent and unprovoked seizures, of which there are many different types, each resulting from sudden, abnormal and increased electrical activity within the brain.

The most common seizure type in older people are focal onset seizures. These arise in one area of the brain, often the temporal lobe, and appear to the observer as a blank stare.

Another presentation of this seizure type includes automatisms. These repetitive, meaningless movements like hand wringing, picking at clothes or repeating a phrase or words over and over may also occur but are less common in older people with epilepsy.

Living with epilepsy may be challenging, with a profound impact on a person's independence and capacity for community engagement, obtaining/retaining a job and social inclusion. This combined with the challenges of epilepsy for those ageing means life can become overwhelming.

With the ageing population growing in Australia, it is anticipated that the number of older people living with epilepsy will increase.

When caring for an older person living with epilepsy, it is important to understand the particular effects of the condition and ensure age-appropriate care and support.

Seizures can be well controlled in older people. However, as they may be more sensitive to the toxicity of anti-seizure medications, the side effects of confusion, disorientation and tiredness are more frequent in this age group. There is also the possibility of adverse interactions between anti-seizure medications and other medications that older people may be taking. A medication review will help identify medication interactions and side effects.

Lived Experience

We recognise all people living with epilepsy and the impact it has on their lives. We take a moment to acknowledge the lived experience they have shared with us. In sharing their stories, we acknowledge the #bravery people living with epilepsy have shown in the face of not getting a fair go.

Memory is also commonly affected with epilepsy and sometimes the medication may increase this problem. It is important that epilepsy medication is taken correctly, so pharmacy packaged medications or a weekly pill box may be helpful. Diaries and calendars can help people keep track of appointments and things they need to remember.

If an older person has frequent seizures, particularly if they live alone, an alarm or alert system may be considered.

Other lifestyle management issues to consider include assessing the home environment for trip and fall risks. An aged care team, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, and epilepsy organisations can provide valuable input and support.

Epilepsy Queensland can provide Epilepsy Management Plans (at no direct cost) to those diagnosed with epilepsy. These plans detail a persons seizure presentation, and how they want to be supported during and after a seizure, including when to seek assistance from emergency services. Visit the Epilepsy Queensland website: epilepsyqueensland.com.au or call (07) 3435 5000 or 1300 852 853 (outside Brisbane).

Epilepsy Support

The National Epilepsy Support Services (NESS) is available Mon – Sat, 9.00am – 7.00pm (AEST) to provide support and information across Australia.
Phone: 1300 761 487
Email: support@epilepsysmart.org.au

A medical note

The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. **Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from a qualified health professional**

This fact sheet has been written by the Living Well Team at Epilepsy Queensland. For further information please contact them on 1300 852 853 or 07 3435 5000.

Although every effort has been made to ensure accurate and up to date information is provided, Epilepsy Queensland and its advisors cannot accept any liability in relation to the information provided. It is strongly recommended that you discuss any information with your doctor or other relevant organisations.

Other Resources

Related Documents

External (including Legislation)

August 2020: Epilepsy and Older Persons: Cecille M Lander

2020: Could it be Epilepsy? A brief guide for health professionals, Epilepsy Queensland