



SEIZURES

Seizures or convulsions are transient disturbances of brain function seen more often in dogs than in cats. A typical “gran mal” seizure is a very unsettling and disturbing event to witness, and is characterized by loss of consciousness in all cases. This distinguishes a seizure from episodes of weakness. Pet owners will usually describe a seizure as a violent or active event. The animal typically falls on its side, with the limbs either rigid and extended, or paddling. It is common to observe urinating, defecating, or salivating during a seizure. Chewing movements may also be noted.

The average seizure lasts from 30-90 seconds, though it will seem much longer to the person observing the episode. It is common for the animal to be sedate or appear confused for minutes to hours after a seizure. As many animals do not manifest an episode at the hospital, your description of the event is important in helping your veterinarian distinguish a seizure from fainting or weakness.

A single seizure of less than two minutes duration is very seldom a life-threatening problem. Still, we advise your pet be seen by a veterinarian for evaluation if a seizure has been observed. If your pet has more than 1-2 seizures in any 24 hour period, immediate evaluation and possibly 24 hour monitoring is imperative, as clusters of seizures can cause brain damage. These can usually be suppressed with medications.

Causes of seizures vary and depend primarily on the age at time of initial onset. Seizures in young animals often suggest an infectious or poisonous cause. In older pets, brain tumors are the most common cause of seizures. In middle aged patients, the most common diagnosis is usually epilepsy. When veterinarians use this term, it implies no identifiable cause can be found to explain the seizures. Ideally, the cause of seizures should be determined prior to starting long-term treatment, because some conditions causing seizures can be resolved with specific treatments. The question of how many tests should be performed to determine the cause is controversial, and should be decided with your veterinarian.

While we would like anti-convulsant therapy to eradicate all seizures, this goal is rarely achieved. A more realistic goal is reduction in frequency, severity and duration of seizures. In general, we do not advise starting anti-convulsant medications after a single seizure for the following reasons; A) It is difficult to establish benefits of the medication until the natural frequency of the seizures is known; B) Some animals will only seizure once or twice a year, in which case the risks from medication side effects may outweigh those from the seizures themselves. We encourage owners to keep a log tracking the dates of their pets’ seizures; anti-convulsant therapy is considered if the animal has one or more seizure a month. Ultimately, the decision as to when to begin treatment must be made by the pet owner.

You should expect to receive information from your veterinarian about your pets’ illness in easily understandable terms. An owner must appreciate the need for regular administration of medication which may be necessary for the remainder of the animals life. Cost of medications and need for periodic evaluation to monitor the drug effects should also be discussed. An alteration in dosage is not advised without consultation with your veterinarian. Common side effects of anti-convulsant medications include increased water consumption and urination, and increased appetite. Sedation is often seen in the first two weeks of treatment, but this resolves as the animal adjusts to the medication.

A very small number of dogs develop life-threatening liver failure in association with anti-convulsant medications. This can occur many years after starting therapy. For this reason, it is important to have your pets' blood tested once or twice a year to check for this complication. If seizures have not occurred for a period of 6-12 months, we advise attempting a slow reduction in dosage under the guidance of a veterinarian. In some pets, medication can be stopped completely.

Although seizure frequency and severity will be reduced in most pets receiving treatment, some patients will not be controlled despite reliable administration of medication. Referral to a specialist should be considered at this time to find the cause and control the seizures. Advanced tests such as ultrasound or a brain scan may be necessary. Treatment of seizures can be very effective and rewarding provided a high degree of communication exists between the pet owner and veterinarian.

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