

Idiopathic Epilepsy in Cats

by Dr. Carrie Journey DVM, DACVIM (Neurology)

SUMMARY:

1. Idiopathic Epilepsy is a condition where pets have repeated seizure episodes and no cause can be found despite extensive testing.
2. Pets who have seizures more than once a month, or who have severe seizures, should be placed on seizure medications. These medications are given long term, often lifelong.
3. Never stop or change a seizure medication without the advice of a veterinarian. Whenever possible it's a good idea to have a single veterinarian be in charge of your pet's medication.
4. Keeping a seizure log is very important.

WHAT TO DO DURING A SEIZURE:

1. Don't panic.
2. Look at your watch. If the seizure is longer than 5 minutes, go to your vet immediately.
3. Do not put your hands near their mouth.
4. If you need to move them away from sharp corners or stairs, pull them by their legs.
5. If you have medications to give during or after the seizure, get the medications and give them as directed.
6. Sit with your pet and comfort them until they wake up.
7. Things like ice packs or water baths can dangerously lower body temperature. If you think your pet is overheating, go the vet immediately.

ONCE THE SEIZURE IS OVER:

1. Mark the event in your seizure log.
2. If there have been more than two seizures in the last 24 hours, or if the seizure was five minutes or longer, seek urgent veterinary advice. If they have more than 3 seizures in a 24 hour period seek emergency veterinary attention. Long term cluster seizure patients may have different recommendations and should follow the advice of their veterinarian.
3. If seizures are increasing in severity or frequency contact your veterinarian for advice.
4. It's normal for your pet to be disoriented or have other abnormal behavior for up to a few hours after a seizure. If this behavior is worsening or persists longer than 24 hours seek urgent veterinary advice.

EXPLANATION

Epilepsy is repeated seizures without an underlying cause. This condition is more common in cats younger than 8 years old, but can happen in any age of cat.

Cat's can very commonly have what are called partial seizures with their epilepsy. In a partial seizure, only part of the brain has a seizure, and therefore only part of the body shows abnormal activity. For instance, face and ear seizures are very common in cats. Some cats will have generalized seizures, where the entire brain and therefore entire body will be seizing.



Journey Veterinary Neurology

(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) 2015 Journey Veterinary Neurology

HOW IS MY CAT DIAGNOSED WITH EPILEPSY?

There is no test for epilepsy. That means to diagnose your cat with epilepsy we must test for everything else and find nothing wrong. This is called a “diagnosis of exclusion”. To look for all of the other possible disease we must perform blood work, imaging of the brain (CT or MRI), a spinal tap. In some cats, we will also run an infectious disease panel. Only about a quarter with seizures have epilepsy- so this testing is important to make sure we are not missing another disease.

Other diseases that cause seizures include cancers, strokes and rare infections. Some of those conditions are very treatable- some even curable. Some of those conditions are very dangerous. This is why diagnostics are so important in cats.

IS MY CAT GOING TO BE OKAY?

Many cats with epilepsy are well controlled with medications. “Well-controlled” can be a little different for every cat, but we generally considered a cat well controlled if they have fewer than 1 seizure every 6 weeks.

There is unfortunately a group of pets who are not controlled on one or two medications. These patients can be challenging.

There is not one perfect seizure medication that works in all cats. This means we sometimes we need to try a few medications to find a good fit for your pet. We judge the success of a medication both by its ability to control seizure and also by the level of side effects your cat has from the medications. We love it when a cat has perfect control with no side effects, but often we have to compromise a bit and find that balance of mild side effects and good control.

WILL EPILEPSY SHORTEN MY PET'S LIFESPAN?

The answer is maybe. While many cats will do well on treatment with epilepsy, there is a small population of cats who are euthanized or die of this disease.

We also see that this disease can cause both financial and emotional strain for the family. Honest communication with your veterinarian about your concerns is important. Many times a treatment plan can be retailored to fix problems- but your veterinarian needs to know what is happening so they can help! Loving pet owners often get very fixated on their pet's quality of life and sacrifice their own happiness and security to take care of their pets. While that's very noble, it's important that you have a good quality of life too. If you are facing significant challenges managing your pet with epilepsy- tell your veterinarian so they can work with you on solutions!

LIVING YOUR LIFE WITH AN EPILEPTIC PET

It's important to not let a diagnosis of epilepsy rule your and your pet's life. Your pet can be left alone. You can go to work or the store without your cat! You might miss a seizure now and again, but truthfully most seizures are short and end on their own. Many times there will be a hint that it happened. For example something is knocked over or there is drool on the floor. It's important to record any suspicious



events on the calendar and alert your veterinarian of any changes. It's generally more important that your veterinarian know about the overall trend of your pet's seizures than every event.

Your pet does need to receive their medications on schedule. Some patients require exactly timed medication, but for most patients there is some wiggle room. For instance, for the majority of patients, if you are having dinner out and will be home afterwards it's okay to be a couple of hours early or late with a pill.

SEIZURE MEDICATION

Not all pets that have epilepsy need seizure medication. However, if your pet's seizures are judged to be too frequent or too severe, it's something you and your veterinarian may consider. For most pets we start seizure medication when we have more than one seizure in a six week period or if seizures are particularly severe.

Once your pet is placed on seizure medication it needs to be given consistently and on schedule. Make sure you refill the medication at least a week before you run out. Set a timer on your watch or phone to remind you to give the pills. If you miss a pill, give it as soon as you remember.

Never stop or change the dose of a seizure medication without first speaking to your veterinarian.

The goal of seizure medication is to make your pet's seizures less frequent and/or less severe. Only about 40% of cats with epilepsy become completely seizure free on medications. The goal in other pets is to balance the amount of medication so your pet has the best possible seizure control with the least side effects from medications. All medications have side effects. This balance between seizures and side effects is easier to achieve in some patients than others. Communicating any frustrations you have about your pet's medication and side effects to your veterinarian is an important step in finding a happy balance.

Diseases and metabolisms change over time- this means at some point your veterinarian may need to change the doses or type of medication your dog is on. Keeping a seizure log and scheduling regular checkups is an important part of your pet's health.

Cats can be challenging to give medications. If you are having problems, please let your veterinarian know.

SEIZURE LOGS

It is very important to keep an accurate log of how often your pet seizures. It also can be helpful to note things like appointments with your veterinarian and various blood work test on this log. The more organized you can be, the better your veterinarian can help you manage your pet's seizures.

There are many ways to keep a log, from a simple notebook to an online calendar.



DOES DIET MATTER?

This part of science is still evolving. There are sporadic reports of food allergies triggering seizures in people- this has not been officially reported in dogs and cats. My clients have occasionally found a food switch to help with seizures- but we recommend that all diet changes be done slowly. There are some studies in people that show a benefit to some diets, like the ketogenic diet for children with epilepsy. We do have some new data on this type of diet for dogs- however there is not research on a diet like this yet for cats.

MONITORING

If you notice an increase in your cat's seizure severity or frequency, please let your veterinarian know.

REGULAR CHECK-UPS AND BLOOD WORK

Your veterinarian is an important partner in controlling your pet's seizures. This means going in for regular check ups. It also means blood work to check for blood levels of medications as well as any side effects. Generally blood work is recommended once to twice a year depending on the medication.

Keys to a successful appointment:

- 1) Bring your pet's seizure log
- 2) Bring all medications with you
- 3) Ask when you make the appointment if your pet should be fasted and if the timing of the appointment relative to medications matter. Some blood test require the pet have no food for up to eight hours before the appointment, other test require your pet to have taken their medication at certain times before the appointment.
- 4) Ask when you make the appointment how long the appointment will take. Some blood test can take several hours to perform.

