

Seizures

What is a seizure?

A seizure is a convulsion or 'fit' and may be generalised or localised/partial. In a **generalised or grand mal seizure**, pets typically lie on their sides and are not responsive to people. They may make running movements with their legs, slobber, urinate and pass stools. **Localised or partial seizures** start in a particular area of the body, may be different on each side of the body and may or may not involve changes in the way that your pet responds to you. Mild partial seizures can include behaviours such as compulsive snapping of the jaw ("fly biting") or obsessive tail chasing as well as chewing gum seizures.

Seizures generally have three stages – aura, ictal and post ictal phase:

1. Aura – some animals have a change in their behaviour before the seizure activity begins. They may be upset or anxious and may seek attention or withdraw and hide. In some cases these signs may go unnoticed and you will have no indication of an oncoming seizure.
2. Ictal phase is the seizure phase
3. Post ictal phase occurs after the seizure activity has ceased and can last a few minutes to sometimes days; signs include apparent blindness and bumping into objects, a ravenous appetite, and in some cases uncharacteristic aggression. It is important to ensure that children are warned not to try and hug their pet to comfort it during this time and that other animals are kept away, particularly when aggressive behaviour is displayed.



When a generalised seizure begins, the dog stiffens and falls. They then begin jerking movements. They are not in pain during the seizure and cannot control their bladder or bowels.

What causes seizures?

There are many possible causes of seizures. The causes are classified into those caused by toxins (e.g. snail bait, compost etc), those where there is a problem within the brain (epilepsy, inflammatory diseases, cancer etc) and those caused by a problem outside the brain (including conditions causing low blood glucose or calcium levels, renal failure, liver failure etc).

What should I do if my pet is having a seizure?

1. If your pet has never had a seizure before, contact your vet as soon as possible. Your pet should be examined by a veterinarian.
2. Do not try to prevent your pet from swallowing their tongue – you are likely to get bitten (your pet may ‘chomp’ involuntarily during the seizure) and swallowing the tongue does not occur in dogs and cats.
3. Remove sharp or dangerous objects from near your pet, to prevent them hitting them and injuring themselves. Make sure unsafe areas are shut off so your pet can't injure themselves during the seizure or during the post ictal phase - this can include stairways, swimming pools, etc.
4. If your pet has had seizures before and is being managed – be aware that if the seizure continues for more than 5 – 10 minutes, or your pet has more than 1 seizure within a short period of time, you should have your pet checked ASAP. There is serious risk of brain damage within 30 minutes if seizure activity is allowed to continue. On the other hand, single grand mal seizures lasting up to 3-4 minutes are very unlikely to be dangerous.
5. Time how long the seizure lasts and write a brief description of your pet's behaviour before, during and after the seizure as well as the date that the seizure occurred. Record the seizure if you are able to. Take this information with you when you seek veterinary advice.
6. It is usually best to leave your pet in a quiet, dark place where it is unlikely to injure itself or others, until it recovers from the post ictal signs.

What will the vet do about the seizures?

When your pet is brought in to the clinic seizing, medication will be used to stop the seizure. This is important because generalised seizures are very physical and pets can do themselves damage – both physical injury and internal damage from the associated rise in body temperature. The second reason early medical intervention is important, is to prevent development of a condition called ‘status epilepticus’, where seizures continue indefinitely and become less responsive to medications.

Your pet will be clinically examined and a blood test performed to help diagnose the reason for the seizures. Procedures to remove toxins from the body may be indicated. Alternatively, other diagnostic tests that can be done to help diagnose the cause behind the seizures are advanced imaging such as CT / MRI and/or a spinal tap (spinal fluid analysis).

What is the prognosis for my pet?

The treatment required and the long term success rate will depend on the cause of the seizing. Your veterinarian will discuss ongoing management with you depending on the results of physical examination and testing.