Reflex epilepsies
Reflex epilepsies are uncommon. They are epilepsies where all or nearly all seizures happen as a result of a specific trigger.¹

Triggers can be thought of as external, for example looking at flashing or flickering lights or hearing specific music. Or they can be internal, for example thinking hard about something in particular, like mathematical sums.²

Different types of reflex epilepsies

Photosensitive epilepsy
Photosensitive epilepsy is a type of epilepsy where flickering or flashing lights, and sometimes strong patterns (usually stripes), trigger seizures. It affects around three in every 100 people with epilepsy.³

Epilepsy Action has more information about photosensitive epilepsy.

Reading epilepsy
Reading epilepsy usually starts in the teenage years. In this type of epilepsy, reading triggers brief jerks (myoclonic seizures) around the jaw and mouth. If you carry on reading when the jerks are happening, there is a risk you may go on to have a tonic-clonic seizure.⁴ Certain types of reading may be more likely to trigger seizures. These include reading aloud, reading complex texts and reading foreign languages.⁵

Epilepsy Action has more information about seizure types.

Hot water epilepsy
In hot water epilepsy, seizures are triggered by being in hot water (such as in a bath), or by having hot water quickly thrown over your head or body. It is most common in older children and teenagers in Southern India. Less commonly, people outside India may have this type of epilepsy.⁶

Musicogenic epilepsy
People with musicogenic epilepsy have seizures triggered by hearing certain sounds, usually music. Some people only have a seizure when they listen to a specific musical track or tune. Other people have reported having seizures triggered by a particular type of music, or by music played on a particular instrument. Seizures in this type of reflex epilepsy are usually focal seizures.  

Other types of reflex epilepsy
Researchers have written about many other things that can trigger seizures in people with reflex epilepsy. These include simple things, such as being touched or tapped, or being startled by a sudden noise. They also include more complex things, such as tooth brushing, eating, playing chess, doing mathematical sums, writing, solving puzzles and so on. These types of epilepsy are very rare and are often the subject of clinical and scientific interest. If you have one of these epilepsies, the same, specific, thing always triggers your seizures.  

Seizure types
There are many different types of epileptic seizure. Any type of seizure can happen in reflex epilepsy, but generalised seizures, particularly myoclonic seizures, appear to be most common.  

Epilepsy Action has more information about seizures types.

Treatment for reflex epilepsy
Wherever possible, you should try to avoid the thing that triggers your seizures. But if this is difficult, or you also have seizures that don’t have a trigger, you may want to consider taking epilepsy medicines.  

Epilepsy Action has more information about epilepsy medicines.

Research into reflex epilepsies
Despite the fact that reflex epilepsies are rare, there is a lot of scientific interest in them. Researchers want to find out why a specific activity or stimulus can trigger an epileptic seizure. Research also continues into why certain things can trigger seizures in some people, but not in others.

About this information
This information is written by Epilepsy Action’s advice and information team, with guidance and
input from people living with epilepsy and medical experts. If you would like to know where
our information is from, or there is anything you would like to say about the information,
please contact us at epilepsy.org.uk/feedback

Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information but cannot be held
liable for any actions taken based on this information.

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Epilepsy Action Helpline
Freephone 0808 800 5050, text 0753 741 0044, email helpline@epilepsy.org.uk, tweet
@epilepsyadvice

Contact details
Epilepsy Action, Gate Way Drive, Yeadon, Leeds LS19 7XY, UK, +44 (0)113 210 8800. A
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