Treatment and care for seizures that last more than 5 minutes and for status epilepticus

This information is about emergency treatment for anyone caring for somebody with epilepsy in the UK. If you are looking for information in another country, please contact your local epilepsy association.

Many people have seizures that last for less than 5 minutes and stop without any treatment. However, some people have seizures that last longer than 5 minutes.¹ Seizures that last longer than 30 minutes can cause damage to the brain, or even death. This is also the case for a cluster of shorter seizures that last for 30 minutes or more. In both cases, this is known as status epilepticus.

Seizures lasting for more than 5 minutes need treating before they turn into status epilepticus.²

What type of seizures turn into status epilepticus?

Any type of seizure can become status epilepticus.

Epilepsy Action has more information about seizure types.

Tonic-clonic (convulsive) status epilepticus

During a long convulsive seizure tonic-clonic seizure, the body struggles to circulate oxygen. When this happens, the brain doesn’t get enough oxygen. Over a long period, this can lead to brain damage and death.³

Epilepsy Action has more information about tonic-clonic seizures.

Other types of status epilepticus

Other types of seizure can also turn into status epilepticus, so also need treating if they last more than 5 minutes.

Non-convulsive status epilepticus

Some people with epilepsy, particularly people with learning disabilities or an epilepsy syndrome, have a different type of status epilepticus. They may just appear to be vacant. Or they might have some minor twitches in their faces or rolling of their eyes. These can be symptoms of non-convulsive status epilepticus. The only clues to this will be changes in their

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brainwave patterns that can be seen on an electroencephalogram (EEG). It’s important that you are aware of this, as it can last for weeks, if not treated.

A syndrome is a group of signs and symptoms that, added together, suggest a particular medical condition.

**If status epilepticus is 30 minutes, why are seizures treated after 5 minutes?**

It’s because the longer a seizure lasts, the less likely it is to stop on its own. Research shows that emergency medicines (see below), given when a seizure has lasted 5 minutes, can prevent status epilepticus.\(^4\)

**What should I do if someone I am caring for has a seizure of 5 minutes or longer?**

That depends on how long their seizures normally last. If their seizures always last for a little longer than 5 minutes and end by themselves, you may not need to do anything. But if the person you care for has had longer seizures in the past that needed emergency medicines, they should have an epilepsy care plan. This should tell you exactly what to do in an emergency. If they don’t have an epilepsy care plan, their epilepsy nurse or specialist should be able to write one with you.

**Should I call an ambulance if someone has a seizure that lasts for more than 5 minutes?**

Yes, you should call an ambulance for all types of seizure if:
- You know it is the person’s first seizure or
- The seizure continues for more than 5 minutes (unless this is usual for the person) or
- One tonic-clonic seizure follows another without the person regaining consciousness between seizures or
- The person is injured during the seizure or
- You believe the person needs urgent medical attention

**How are seizures that last for more than 5 minutes treated?**

Usually with emergency medicines.

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Emergency medicines

Midazolam
Midazolam is given by a dropper, inside the person’s cheek or nose. This can be given by anyone who has been trained to do it, as well as healthcare professionals.

Diazepam
If diazepam is given by a medical professional, they will usually give it by injection. But it can be given by other people with the right training. They will usually give it rectally (into the back passage).

Other medicines used to treat seizures that last a long time and status epilepticus
If someone has a long seizure or status epilepticus when they are in hospital, it’s likely that they will be treated with different medicines. And these are more likely to be given by injection or a drip.

Should I be trained to use emergency medicines?
Yes, everyone who might need to give another person emergency medicines should have some training. This is usually given by a healthcare or medical professional. For a DVD that shows how midazolam is given, contact Epilepsy Action.

Epilepsy care plan

Should I have written information about what and how to use emergency medicines?
Yes, it’s essential for anyone who might need to give emergency medicine. This information should be in the person with epilepsy’s individual care plan. It should show when, and how much, emergency medicine is used, and what to do afterwards. Their doctor or epilepsy nurse should write their epilepsy care plan with them. This will give them the chance to give their informed consent to their treatment.

For more information about informed consent go to website: nhs.uk

If you would like a care plan template for either rectal diazepam or midazolam, please contact Epilepsy Action

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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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Your support
We hope you have found this information helpful. As a charity, we rely on donations to provide our advice and information. If you would like to make a donation, here are some ways you can do this.

- Visit www.epilepsy.org.uk/donate
- Text ACT NOW to 70700 (This will cost you £5 plus your usual cost of sending a text. Epilepsy Action will receive £5.)
- Send a cheque payable to Epilepsy Action to the address below.

Did you know you can also become a member of Epilepsy Action from as little as £1 a month? To find out more, visit epilepsy.org.uk/join or call 0113 210 8800.

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

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