

UNUSUAL SEIZURE FEATURES

What you need to know

When we think of seizures, the images that come to mind often involve someone staring into space for a few seconds or convulsing on the floor for several minutes. In many cases such characteristics do occur, yet seizure activity can also present with odd behaviors, personality traits, signs, and symptoms that we might typically associate with psychiatric or emotional issues rather than with organic or strictly medical problems. This is important, because being aware of the possibility that seizures may be driving the way a person acts can help identify what is really causing the problem. We can ask the doctor to consider this when evaluating the patient, thus improving the chance for an accurate diagnosis and more effective treatment.

One brief story to illustrate this: Once a man in his 60s, who lived in a group home, was docile, hardly spoke, sat motionless for hours at a time, needed prompts for all his ADLs, and was diagnosed with Dementia. A neurologist evaluated him, suspected that he might be having seizures, and placed him on anticonvulsant medication. In a month the man was ballroom dancing and initiating conversations. He had been in a state of *constant* absence seizure activity.

Things you may observe (these features may occur during seizure activity or between seizures):

- Sudden, unprovoked, primitive-like rage (kicking, hitting, spitting, biting, swearing) followed by exhaustion and remorse
- Increase in anxiety, experiencing panic attacks
- Complaints of experiencing visual distortions, strange tastes or smells, strange sensations of touch
- Masturbation, hypersexuality, unusual sexual behaviors
- Sudden, heightened interest in religion
- Increase in speaking ability, inability to speak, unusual speech patterns; hypergraphia (excessive writing)
- Spontaneous singing, laughing, or crying, which may seem inappropriate to the situation
- Obsessiveness, stubbornness, ritualistic behaviors
- Tendency to suddenly take off running or elope from the residence

Things people do to prevent a seizure from happening or to hurry it along and get it over with:

- Seek scents
- Cause self-injury
- Change body temperature (take clothes off, take hot or cold baths, burn self)
- Eat certain foods
- Induce vomiting
- Hold breath or hyperventilate
- Masturbate
- Watch vivid videos with music; stare at a strobe light

If you notice that someone you support displays any of the aforementioned traits, please discuss it with the individual's PCP or neurologist. These behaviors could be indicative of seizure activity!

Source: Ruth Ryan Myers, MD, "Unusual Seizures," Warren (Pa) State Hospital, 10/18/2019.