

Epilepsy - it happens, we can deal with it.



How to recognize it

Epilepsy, it is a word that can understandably cause alarm. This may be because witnessing a fit can be very frightening; because the timing of them can be unpredictable; because the cause is often unknown.

Fits are the result of abnormal activity in the brain. As Vets, we see seizures more commonly in dogs, but cats can also suffer from fits. It can occur in any breed, although some breeds are more commonly affected. It can be passed through generations and be more common in particular families.

Seizures occur when an individual is relaxed or asleep. Collapse during exercise is often due to fainting where not enough oxygen reaches the brain. Twitching, whimpering or growling when asleep (while dreaming) are twitching episodes not fits. Many pets have only a single seizure: if they have more than one seizure then they have epilepsy.

Fits tend to happen in three stages. If you know what you are looking for, then they can be recognised early.

1. The first stage happens while your pet is conscious: they can become disorientated and may want to hide away, or they may seek out your company and come and sit with you.
2. The second stage begins with them becoming stiff as all the muscles tense up. They often fall onto their sides. This is followed by shaking and spasm of the muscles, which often progresses to involuntary paddling with the paws. They may lose control of their bladder and their bowels. This stage often lasts only a few minutes.
3. The final stage is the recovery phase. Some pets will get up and carry on with what they were doing. Some may appear dazed and remain disorientated for hours and they may be temporarily blind. Some may have a set pattern of behaviour, drinking water or asking to go out to the toilet.

As each fit can cause damage to the brain, several fits may happen close together. It is important to report any fit to and seek advice from your vet. When reporting it, note the progress and duration of a fit, and the circumstance that preceded it. A video of the fit is always helpful.

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