445 Seizures and Epilepsy

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A *seizure* (from the Latin *sacire*, "to take possession of") is a paroxysmal event due to abnormal excessive or synchronous neuronal activity in the brain. Depending on the distribution of discharges, this abnormal brain activity can have various manifestations, ranging from dramatic convulsive activity to experiential phenomena not readily discernible by an observer. Although a variety of factors influence the incidence and prevalence of seizures, ~5–10% of the population will have at least one seizure, with the highest incidence occurring in early childhood and late adulthood.

The meaning of the term *seizure* needs to be carefully distinguished from that of epilepsy. *Epilepsy* describes a condition in which a person has *recurrent* seizures due to a chronic, underlying process. This definition implies that a person with a single seizure, or recurrent seizures due to correctable or avoidable circumstances, does not necessarily have epilepsy. Epilepsy refers to a clinical phenomenon rather than a single disease entity, because there are many forms and causes of epilepsy. However, among the many causes of epilepsy there are various *epilepsy syndromes* in which the clinical and pathologic characteristics are distinctive and suggest a specific underlying etiology.

Using the definition of epilepsy as two or more unprovoked seizures, the incidence of epilepsy is ~0.3–0.5% in different populations throughout the world, and the prevalence of epilepsy has been estimated at 5–30 persons per 1000.

CLASSIFICATION OF SEIZURES

Determining the type of seizure that has occurred is essential for focusing the diagnostic approach on particular etiologies, selecting the appropriate therapy, and providing potentially vital information regarding prognosis. The International League against Epilepsy (ILAE) Commission on Classification and Terminology, 2005–2009 has provided an updated approach to classification of seizures (Table 445-1). This system is based on the clinical features of seizures and associated electroencephalographic findings. Other potentially distinctive features such as etiology or cellular substrate are not considered in this classification system, although this will undoubtedly change in the future as more is learned about the pathophysiologic mechanisms that underlie specific seizure types.

A fundamental principle is that seizures may be either focal or generalized. *Focal seizures* originate within networks limited to one cerebral hemisphere (note that the term *partial seizures* is no longer used). *Generalized seizures* arise within and rapidly engage networks distributed across both cerebral hemispheres. Focal seizures are usually associated with structural abnormalities of the brain. In contrast, generalized seizures may result from cellular, biochemical, or structural abnormalities that have a more widespread distribution. There are clear exceptions in both cases, however.

TABLE 445-1 CLASSIFICATION OF SEIZURES

1. **Focal seizures**
   (Can be further described as having motor, sensory, autonomic, cognitive, or other features)
2. **Generalized seizures**
   a. Absence
      Typical
      Atypical
   b. Tonic clonic
   c. Clonic
   d. Tonic
   e. Atonic
   f. Myoclonic
3. **May be focal, generalized, or unclear**
   Epileptic spasms

FOCAL SEIZURES

Focal seizures arise from a neuronal network either discretely localized within one cerebral hemisphere or more broadly distributed but still within the hemisphere. With the new classification system, the subcategories of "simple focal seizures" and "complex focal seizures" have been eliminated. Instead, depending on the presence of cognitive impairment, they can be described as focal seizures with or without dyscognitive features. Focal seizures can also evolve into generalized seizures. In the past this was referred to as *focal seizures with secondary generalization,* but the new system relies on specific descriptions of the type of generalized seizures that evolve from the focal seizure.

The routine interictal (i.e., between seizures) electroencephalogram (EEG) in patients with focal seizures is often normal or may show brief discharges termed *epileptiform spikes*, or *sharp waves*. Because focal seizures can arise from the medial temporal lobe or inferior frontal lobe (i.e., regions distant from the scalp), the EEG recorded during the seizure may be nonlocalizing. However, the seizure focus is often detected using sphenoidal or surgically placed intracranial electrodes.

Focal Seizures Without Dyscognitive Features Focal seizures can cause motor, sensory, autonomic, or psychic symptoms without impairment of cognition. For example, a patient having a focal motor seizure arising from the right primary motor cortex near the area controlling hand movement will note the onset of involuntary movements of the contralateral, left hand. These movements are typically clonic (i.e., repetitive, flexion/extension movements) at a frequency of ~2–3 Hz; pure tonic posturing may be seen as well. Since the cortical region controlling hand movement is immediately adjacent to the region for facial expression, the seizure may also cause abnormal movements of the face synchronous with the movements of the hand. The EEG recorded with scalp electrodes during the seizure (i.e., an ictal EEG) may show abnormal discharges in a very limited region over the appropriate area of cerebral cortex if the seizure focus involves the cerebral convexity. Seizure activity occurring within deeper brain structures is sometimes not detected by the standard EEG, however, and may require intracranial electrodes for its detection.

Three additional features of focal motor seizures are worth noting. First, in some patients, the abnormal motor movements may begin in a very restricted region such as the fingers and gradually progress (over seconds to minutes) to include a larger portion of the extremity. This phenomenon, described by Hughlings Jackson and known as a "Jacksonian march," represents the spread of seizure activity over a progressively larger region of motor cortex. Second, patients may experience a localized paresis (Todd's paralysis) for minutes to many hours in the involved region following the seizure. Third, in rare instances, the seizure may continue for hours or days. This condition, termed *epilepsia partialis continua*, is often refractory to medical therapy.

Focal seizures may also manifest as changes in somatic sensation (e.g., paresthesias), vision (flashing lights or formed hallucinations), equilibrium (sensation of falling or vertigo), or autonomic function (flushing, sweating, piloerection). Focal seizures arising from the temporal or frontal cortex may also cause alterations in hearing, olfaction, or higher cortical function (psychic symptoms). This includes the sensation of unusual, intense odors (e.g., burning rubber or kerosene) or sounds (crude or highly complex sounds), or an epigastric