

Idiopathic Epilepsy

What is idiopathic epilepsy?

Idiopathic epilepsy is a common cause of recurrent seizures in dogs. It tends to start causing seizures between six months and six years old and is a lifelong condition. Some dogs with idiopathic epilepsy have several seizures a day, whereas others have a lot less (perhaps one every few months or even years). Most dogs appear completely fine between episodes. We don't yet fully understand the cause of idiopathic epilepsy in every dog, but it's been proven to be a genetic problem (passed from parent to puppy) in many breeds.

Breeds prone to idiopathic epilepsy.

Idiopathic epilepsy affects approximately one in every 200 dogs across the UK and although it can affect any breed, it's most common in the following:



- Beagle
- Dachshund

- German Shepherd Dog
- Cocker Spaniel
- Collie
- Golden Retriever
- Labrador Retriever
- Australian Shepherd Dog
- Schnauzer
- Standard Poodle
- Saint Bernard
- Siberian Husky
- Basset Hound
- English Springer Spaniel
- Hungarian Vizsla

Symptoms

Idiopathic epilepsy tends to cause seizures that last between one and three minutes. Some dogs have several seizures per day, whereas others have a lot less, (perhaps one every few months or years). Most dogs with idiopathic epilepsy have no other symptoms and are perfectly well between seizures.

Before the seizure

Epileptic seizures are most common during rest and sleep, but other triggers might include stress, excitement, hot weather, a change in routine or sleeping patterns, or hormonal changes. You might notice your dog showing some of the following signs a few seconds to an hour beforehand:

- Restlessness
- Tremors
- Weeing
- Barking
- Salivating
- Staring into the distance

During the seizure

Most dogs with idiopathic epilepsy have ‘generalised’ (full body) seizures. During a generalised seizure, dogs tend to fall over, lose consciousness, thrash their legs, drool/foam at the mouth, and wee/poo. However, some dogs with idiopathic epilepsy have ‘focal’ (partial) seizures which only affect part of their brain and cause milder symptoms such as twitching in the face or leg. Whatever type of seizure your dog has, it can be very unpleasant to witness but fortunately your dog is likely to be completely unaware of what’s happening – stay calm.

After the seizure

Most dogs return to normal within a few minutes of having a seizure, but some can take as long as a couple of days (although this is rare). Within this time, you may notice that your dog is a little confused, unsteady on their feet, low in energy, and less interested in food. It's very important to contact your vet for advice after your dog has had a seizure.

Diagnosis

Idiopathic epilepsy doesn't cause any changes that can be picked up on tests so is usually diagnosed by ruling out other causes.

- Your vet may want to run some blood and urine tests to check for anything abnormal.
- If nothing abnormal is detected, your dog has no other symptoms, and they are in the right age bracket, idiopathic epilepsy is the most likely cause – at this point your vet may want to try response to some treatment.
- If your vet is concerned that your dog's seizures could be caused by something else, they may suggest referring them for an MRI brain scan.



Treatment

Anti-epileptic drugs

- There are a few different anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) that can help control seizures in dogs. They work by stabilising electrical activity in the brain which reduces the chance of

a seizure happening. Examples are phenobarbital and levetiracetam.

- Sometimes a combination of drugs may be required, and a new drug will be added in if one fails to control the seizures by itself.
- Most dogs don't stop having seizures completely with AEDs but they tend to be a lot less frequent and severe. The aim is to reduce the severity and frequency, ideally to no more than one every 3 months.

A specialist diet

- There is evidence to show that a diet or supplement enriched with medium chain triglycerides (MCT), can help some dogs suffering with seizures caused by idiopathic epilepsy. Please ask us for more information as we can supply these.

Trigger avoidance

- If you know of anything that triggers your dog's seizures, such as loud noises, bright lights, or busy/stressful environments, avoid these wherever possible.

Monitoring and check-ups

Dogs taking anti-epileptic medication need regular check-ups with the vet to make sure:

- Their seizures are well-controlled.
- The drug is at therapeutic levels in their blood stream and their drug dose is still correct.
- Any side effects are manageable.

They may need regular blood tests and, if your dog isn't responding as expected, they may need further investigations such as an MRI brain scan.

Status epilepticus

Any seizure that lasts for more than five minutes (known as **status epilepticus**) can cause permanent damage to the brain and other vital organs, so if your dog has been seizing for **more than two minutes**, we advise calling your vet immediately. It's likely that they will advise bringing your dog to the surgery for emergency treatment, which might include:

- A combination of anti-epileptic drugs given intravenously directly into the bloodstream to stop the seizure.
- If this isn't successful, your dog may need to be put under an anaesthetic to control their seizure.
- An overnight stay once the seizure is controlled so your vet can monitor them and stop any further seizures straight away.
- A fluid drip to keep them hydrated while they recover.
- Some investigations to find out what caused their seizure (unless the cause is already known).



To book in for your pet in for a health check please call us on 01423 228080 or visit www.clarohillvets.co.uk