

Epilepsy Fact Sheet

Starting Seizure Medications

Your Vet's Point of View

This information sheet is designed to highlight some important considerations about starting medication for your pet's condition. We understand that receiving a diagnosis of epilepsy can be overwhelming, and our aim is to empower you with knowledge and resources to help you navigate your healthcare journey.

Why Didn't My Pet Get Seizure Medication After the First Seizure?

Watching your pet have a seizure is scary. It is very normal to leave your vet appointment thinking, "Why aren't we starting medication right away?" In many cases, not starting a daily seizure medication after one seizure is not ignoring the problem. It is a careful medical decision based on your pet's health, the type of seizure, the chance it may happen again, and the risks and benefits of long-term medication. As practicing neurologists, we can assure you the harder decision is not to condemn a dog to a life of seizure medications, as we don't always know they (or their owners) will need it. In many cases (but not always), it is better to allow them to show us if they are going to continue to have seizures and what their frequency will be, as in some cases, it may not be frequent enough to make the risks of medications worth the potential side effects.

Isn't One Seizure Reason Enough to Start Medication?

Not always. A seizure is a symptom, not a diagnosis. Seizures can happen because of many different problems, including epilepsy, toxins, liver disease, blood sugar abnormalities, brain inflammation, stroke-like events, brain tumors, trauma, or other illnesses. Some events that look like seizures may not be seizures at all, such as fainting, collapse, pain episodes, vestibular events, or abnormal movement disorders.

Because of this, your veterinarian may recommend gathering more information before starting a daily seizure medication. The first seizure may be isolated, may not represent a chronic condition, and may require evaluation for an underlying cause before deciding whether medication is truly needed.

When a pet has only one seizure and no neurological deficits, the question becomes “Will that pet have another seizure?” or “Is their seizure frequency only once or twice a year?”.

Why Shouldn't We Simply Start Medication "Just to be Safe"?

Daily seizure medications can be very helpful, but they are not harmless. Some medications can cause sedation, wobbliness, increased hunger, increased thirst, increased urination, behavior changes, or effects on the liver or other organs. Some require regular bloodwork or drug-level monitoring. Once started, seizure medication may become a long-term or lifelong commitment.

The goal is to use medication when the benefit of reducing seizures outweighs the risks, cost, monitoring, and daily commitment. The ideal treatment plan should reduce seizure frequency, length, and severity while minimizing medication side effects and protecting quality of life. Finding that balance can be difficult.

Is it Possible for a Pet to Experience a Single Seizure and Never Have Another One?

Yes. It can happen. Some pets have one seizure and never have another, or they may go months to years before another episode. In those cases, starting daily medication after a single event may expose the pet to side effects and require monitoring without providing much benefit. That does not mean the seizure was unimportant. It means your veterinarian may want to look for a pattern before committing your pet to daily medication.

What does my Veterinarian Usually do Instead?

After a first seizure, your veterinarian may recommend:

- A detailed history, including possible toxin exposure, medications, diet changes, trauma, or unusual behavior
- A full physical and neurological examination
- Bloodwork and sometimes urine testing
- Liver function testing when indicated
- Reviewing a video of the episode, if one is available
- Recommend starting a seizure log to track whether another episode occurs
- Referral, MRI, spinal fluid testing, or additional diagnostics in certain cases

An MRI is a tool used in some seizure cases, but it is not the only useful diagnostic test. A good history, neurological exam, bloodwork, and other accessible tests can still provide valuable information, especially when advanced imaging is not feasible or is not elected for various reasons.

When are Seizure Medications More Likely to be Prescribed?

Seizure medications may be recommended earlier when the risk of another serious seizure is higher or when the seizure pattern is more concerning.

Medication is more likely to be considered if your pet has:

- More than one seizure within a short period of time
- Two or more seizures within about six months
- A single seizure lasting around 2-5 minutes or longer
- Cluster seizures, meaning more than one seizure in a 24-hour period
- A severe, prolonged, or unusual recovery period after the seizure (especially if aggression is present).
- A known or suspected brain disease, previous brain injury, or structural brain problem
- Increasing seizure frequency, duration, or severity over time

These criteria are consistent with veterinary epilepsy consensus recommendations on when long-term antiseizure medication should be considered.

What if the Seizure was Really Long?

A prolonged seizure is different from a brief single seizure. Seizures lasting around 2 - 5 minutes or longer can become medical emergencies because they may not stop on their own and can lead to dangerous body temperature changes, brain damage, and other complications. In those cases, your veterinarian may recommend emergency treatment, hospitalization, rescue medication, or starting a daily anti-seizure medication sooner, even if it was the first seizure ever!

What if My Pet had Several Seizures in One Day?

Multiple seizures in 24 hours, often called cluster seizures, are taken more seriously than a single brief seizure. Pets with cluster seizures are at greater risk for additional seizures and may need a different plan. That plan may include daily medication, at-home rescue medication, emergency care instructions, or referral to a neurologist.

Does Medication Cure Seizures?

No. Seizure medication usually helps to try to control seizures; it does not cure the underlying condition. Even when medication works well, the goal may be fewer seizures, shorter seizures, less

severe seizures, and better recovery, not necessarily zero seizures forever. In fact, we often tell owners to prepare for seizures to occur in the future, as only a small percentage (15%) of dogs are reported to not have another seizure after being diagnosed as epileptic.

Does Not Starting Medication Mean Nothing is Wrong?

No. It means your veterinarian is weighing the whole picture. A single seizure may be the first sign of epilepsy, but it may also be an isolated event, a reaction to a temporary problem, or a sign of a different disease process. Monitoring carefully after the first seizure helps your veterinarian decide whether daily medication is truly needed.

What Should I Watch for at Home?

Keep a seizure log and write down:

- Date and time of the seizure
- How long it lasted
- What your pet was doing before it happened
- What the seizure looked like
- Whether your pet lost awareness
- Whether there was urination, defecation, drooling, paddling, stiffness, or vocalizing
- How long recovery took
- Any possible toxin exposure, missed medications, illness, stress, or diet change
- Whether you gave any rescue medication, if prescribed

A video can also be very helpful if it is safe to take one. Your Pet's Piece of Mind App helps to make logging seizures and taking videos easier!!

This information sheet is intended for educational purposes only and does not replace professional veterinary medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always consult a qualified veterinarian regarding your pet's health.