

Febrile seizures

Information for parents and carers

Introduction

This leaflet has been written to help you understand more about febrile seizures. Please ask us if you have any more questions.

What are febrile seizures?

Seizures are also known as fits or convulsions; and febrile means having a high temperature or fever. A febrile seizure is an episode of fitting (limb shaking, eye rolling, loss of consciousness) associated with having a high temperature. They affect boys and girls between the ages of six months and five years. They usually occur with common illnesses such as ear infections or coughs and colds.

What does a febrile seizure look like?

- They often start with the child looking flushed, and the eyes may appear to roll backwards.
- The child may look dazed and then become unconscious (this means the child is unaware of his/her surroundings and will not respond to being picked up or talked to).
- The body may go stiff and there may be jerking or twitching of the arms and legs.
- Sometimes the child's face might go blue.
- It is unusual for the whole episode to last longer than five minutes (but often for a watching parent it feels like a lot longer).
- Usually the child is drowsy afterwards, but he/she should have woken up within an hour.
- While most febrile seizures follow roughly this pattern, they can vary from child to child.
- Occasionally a child may have more than one seizure over the course of the same feverish illness.
- Sometimes the first indication that a child is developing a feverish illness is that they have a seizure, with the high temperature coming on shortly afterwards.

Are febrile seizures dangerous?

Febrile seizures are certainly frightening, but are very rarely dangerous. The short episodes of fitting usually seen with febrile seizures do not cause brain damage, and the underlying illness is rarely serious.

What do I do if a febrile seizure happens at home?

- It is easier said than done, but try to stay calm. Remember, most seizures will stop on their own within a few minutes.
- Look at a watch or clock and note the time the fit starts (and stops).
- Stay with your child and try to lay them on their side. Do not restrain your child and do not put anything in his/her mouth.
- Loosen any tight clothing and remove nearby objects that may cause harm.
- It is useful for doctors to be able to observe the episode so, if you can, take a video of the seizure (using your mobile phone, for example).

Should my child see a doctor after a febrile seizure?

If your child has a febrile seizure then it is very important that they see a doctor the same day. Try in the first instance to see your GP, or you can attend your local accident & emergency (casualty) department.

However, for **any seizure**, you must call an ambulance (**dial 999**) straight away if:

- your child is less than one year old
- the seizure lasts more than five minutes
- another seizure begins after the first one has stopped without the child getting completely better in between
- your child has any difficulty breathing or looks very unwell.

If my child is taken to hospital urgently, what will happen?

If a seizure lasts longer than five minutes, it may be necessary for the paediatric team to give drugs to stop it. This will involve putting a cannula (a tiny flexible tube) in a vein in the hand or arm. The doctors will examine your child and may do investigations, such as blood tests or a lumbar puncture in a very young child or baby. Your child may need to stay in hospital.

Who is at risk?

Lots of children have febrile seizures. Approximately one in 20 children will have a febrile seizure at some point before the age of five. Sometimes febrile seizures run in families.

Might it happen again?

If a child has had a febrile seizure, then there is a one in three chance that he/she will have another one in a future feverish illness. If this does happen, then as a matter of precaution your child should see a doctor again as soon as possible.

Are febrile seizures the same as epilepsy?

Epilepsy is the tendency to have recurrent seizures without a fever and can affect children and adults of any age. The vast majority of children who have a febrile seizure will never go on to have epilepsy.

Can febrile seizures be prevented?

There is little that can be done to prevent a febrile seizure. However, it is important that during a feverish illness you give paracetamol or ibuprofen to keep your child comfortable, and make sure he/she drinks lots of fluids. Never give a child aspirin. Keep your child cool with minimal clothing. Sponge baths are not helpful, and you should never put a fitting child in the bath.

What about routine immunisations?

A child who has had a febrile seizure should be immunised as normal. You can discuss this with your doctor if you have any further questions or concerns.

Useful contacts

- NHS Direct **0845 4647**
- NHS Choices Health A-Z www.nhs.uk/conditions/febrile-convulsions
- NICE guidance on feverish illness in children
www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/pdf/CG47Guidance.pdf
- BMJ Clinical Evidence, Febrile Seizures
clinicalevidence.bmj.com/cweb/conditions/chd/0324/0324.jsp

How do I make a comment about my treatment?

We aim to provide the best possible service and staff are happy to answer any questions you may have. If you were pleased with your care and want to write to let us know we would appreciate your time in doing so.

However, if your experience of our services does not meet your expectations and you would like to speak to someone other than staff caring for you, please contact the patient advice and liaison service (PALS) on **020 3313 0088** for Charing Cross, Hammersmith, and Queen Charlotte's and Chelsea Hospitals or **020 3312 7777** for St Mary's and Western Eye Hospitals. You can also email PALS at pals@imperial.nhs.uk. The PALS team will listen to your concerns, suggestions or queries and are often able to solve problems on behalf of patients.

Alternatively, you may wish to express your concerns in writing to:

**Chief Executive, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust, Trust Headquarters,
The Bays, South Wharf Road, London W2 1NY**

Alternative formats

This information can be provided on request in large print, as a sound recording, in Braille, or in alternative languages. Please contact the communications team on **020 3312 5592**.