

Issue Brief: Epilepsy Awareness and Seizure First Aid

Summary

Epilepsy is a disease of the brain that causes seizures and is not caused by temporary underlying medical conditions. A seizure is a shortchange of normal brain activity and can be dangerous to this individual.¹ This disease can affect people in many ways, as there are different types and many causes of seizures.² In 2015, 1.2% of the population had active epilepsy. This is equivalent to around 3.4 million individuals (3 million adults and 470,000 children).³ Epilepsy can be caused by many different conditions. Known causes include brain tumors, stroke, traumatic brain injury, some genetic disorders, brain infection from parasites, loss of oxygen to the brain, and other neurologic diseases such as Alzheimer's.³ Additionally, 2 in 3 people with epilepsy do not know the cause of their disease.³

The Seizure Recognition and First Aid certification is a training course provided by the Epilepsy Foundation that provides information to increase the knowledge, skills, and confidence of recognizing seizures while being able to safely administer seizure first aid.⁴ Participants can complete the online course that lasts 90 minutes and will receive a 2-year certification. This is an especially important training for individuals who have a family member or friend with seizures, have a job where they provide care for people with seizures, or have a job where they work with the public, such as schoolteachers.⁴

Health Impact

Seizure Recognition and First Aid training increases knowledge on how to help someone during a seizure episode, which can save their life. A study conducted in 2019 found that only 16% of U.S. adults felt knowledgeable about epilepsy and only 25% knew about seizure first aid.⁵ Improving these statistics may save someone's life. There are many health and safety concerns that arise with epilepsy. People who experience seizures may get hurt during an episode, as they may be confused and unaware of what is going on, they may experience unconsciousness, or the seizure could last too long and cluster.⁴ Seizure Recognition and First Aid certification can address these health and safety concerns by improving awareness and knowledge during dangerous situations.

Health Equity Impact Statement

In general, individuals with epilepsy face more disparities and barriers to care in the United States.⁶ According to the CDC, U.S. adults with epilepsy or active epilepsy were more likely to report the inability to afford prescription drugs, more difficulty finding a doctor, transportation barriers to care, or were in families that have problems paying medical bills.⁶

Women who have active epilepsy face special challenges compared to men. Hormonal changes may cause women with epilepsy to have more seizures during their period. Additionally, there are more concerns regarding pregnancy, as having a seizure may increase the risk of harming the baby.¹ In terms of racial equity, African Americans are more likely to be diagnosed with epilepsy compared to Caucasians.⁷ 578,000 African Americans have epilepsy or a seizure disorder. Additionally, 25,000 African Americans are diagnosed with epilepsy

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each year in the United States.⁷ Concerns for the African American community include stigma surrounding epilepsy and the appropriate access to care.⁷

Public health practitioners and epilepsy providers should be connecting the populations who are disproportionately impacted by the disease to community programs and clinical services.⁶ This includes encouraging Seizure Recognition and First Aid training for these populations and for individuals who interact socially or professionally with these populations.

Iowa Data

According to the CDC, Iowa has around 31,400 cases of active epilepsy in the state.² 4,400 of those cases were children ages 0-17.² The Epilepsy Foundation of Iowa (EFIA) provides programs and services that support individuals and families who are impacted by epilepsy.⁸ EFIA supports and mobilizes the epilepsy community through advocacy, direct services, educational activities, and research.⁸ This organization has also provided seizure education to over 4,000 staff working at agencies who directly serve individuals with epilepsy.⁹

Action

Improving the knowledge and attitudes about epilepsy must be a public health priority due to stigma around the disorder.⁵ Improving knowledge, applying appropriate care, encouraging training, and increasing familiarity of seizure symptoms will potentially save many lives.

IPHA supports the following strategies to address the gap in knowledge regarding epilepsy and seizure recognition:

- Encourage Seizure Recognition and First Aid certification and training through the Epilepsy Foundation of Iowa.
- Educate family, caregivers, and teachers on seizure recognition and treatment options.
- Increase awareness of epilepsy among underserved and disparate communities.
- Provide resources on Seizure Recognition and First Aid certification and training for public health practitioners in Iowa.

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