



Children's
of Alabama®

E-NEWS for Epilepsy

Comorbidities With Epilepsy by Matthew Thompson, Psy.D., ABPP

Epilepsy is a highly diverse condition. Children may have seizures for many different reasons. Some children are born with brain abnormalities that cause seizures. Others have a normal birth but acquire an injury or illness that gives rise to seizures. In many cases, however, the exact cause of the seizures is unknown.

In addition to seizures, many children experience additional problems that have been previously ignored. These other problems are called "comorbidities." Because epilepsy is such a diverse condition, the comorbidities that often accompany epilepsy are also varied. Examples of common comorbidities include problems with cognitive function such as learning and memory. Another common comorbidity is emotional and behavioral difficulties.



Problems With School Performance

Many children with epilepsy struggle with schoolwork and have difficulty learning and retaining information. They may need an individual education plan (IEP) at school. Children with epilepsy are often overlooked in the school system because their learning challenges may not fit cleanly into a well-known category. But by law, if a child has a medical problem that interferes significantly with academic achievement, he or she is entitled to an IEP. We strive to provide this type of education for parents so they can advocate for their children in the school system. Your child may also be referred for a neuropsychological evaluation to further assess his or her cognitive strengths and weaknesses, and to help advocate for their needs in the school system.

Problems With Mood, Behavior

There are many reasons for emotional difficulties in children with epilepsy. Children are often under social stress and may experience stigma. Many children with epilepsy are teased and bullied at school. Seizures, if witnessed by classmates, may cause embarrassment and social isolation. Breakthrough seizures also result in missed school days. Many children do not have the opportunity to participate in the same social activities as their peers. For instance, some children do not get to spend the night with their friends or participate in other social activities due to their seizures. These unfortunate situations involving lifestyle challenges associated with epilepsy further contribute to difficulties with mood and adjustment.

The stigma attached to epilepsy in our society is a serious problem. Many people have misconceptions about epilepsy. While gains have been made in terms of educating the public, many still believe that epilepsy is contagious or a "curse" or indication of one's character, as opposed to a serious neurological condition.

How To Get Help

Fortunately, there are ways to help children with epilepsy so they can enjoy a full life. At Children's of Alabama, we recognize seizures are just one component of a large and complex syndrome. We strive to thoroughly assess each child on an individual basis to determine how the seizures affect their lives and what other challenges they may experience in addition to the seizures. We recognize more than half the children who present to our clinic after their first seizure are also likely to have problems such as ADHD, learning disorders and emotional/behavioral challenges. By screening for these conditions, we can provide appropriate referrals to other specialists and provide education for parents to help them advocate for their children in the community and in the school system.

If your child is a patient here at the UAB Pediatric Epilepsy Program at Children's of Alabama, and you have concerns about your child's cognitive status or emotional/behavioral problems, we encourage you to discuss your concerns with the doctor. Counseling, medication changes or additional medications may help with certain problems such as attention deficits or depression. We may also make a referral to another healthcare specialist.

More information is available at www.childrensal.org/epilepsy.