

Psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES)



What are psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES)?

PNES are made up of abnormal body movements that look like an epileptic seizure. An epileptic seizure is when there are abnormal electrical signals in the brain. PNES:

- Are not caused by abnormal electrical signals in the brain.
- Are often due to emotional stress.
- Are often due to mental health challenges.

What causes PNES?

PNES are a condition of the mind, not the brain. Some children have PNES after trauma. Some children do not even know that they are under stress. PNES can be caused by:

- Mental distress
- Personality disorders
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Problems at school
- Social problems
- Unpleasant thoughts or sensations
- Problems with learning
- Family issues (such as divorce, problems with siblings or death of a loved one)

They are **not** caused by:

- Medical problems
- Abnormal electrical signals in the brain

How do PNES differ from seizures caused by epilepsy?

| Epileptic seizures (seizures caused by epilepsy) | Psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES) |
|---|--|
| Caused by a medical problem | Caused by emotional or mental stress |
| Show up on an EEG (electroencephalogram) as abnormal electrical activity in the brain | Do not show up on an EEG or other medical test |
| Can be controlled by seizure medicines, other medical treatments or surgery | Can be controlled through counseling and learning how to cope with stress; may be controlled by medicine to help with stress |

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES), continued

What else do I need to know about PNES?

PNES are complex and hard to understand. Children who have them:

- Cannot stop or control them.
- Are not faking their symptoms.

PNES often increase when stress builds up. Children with PNES often:

- Do not know why they have them.
- Cannot find the cause of their emotional or mental stress.
- Have trouble coping with certain problems in life.
- Feel guilt and shame. They may think others view them as faking or think they can control them.
- Need family help and support. This includes counseling.
- Need support at school.

What are some common features of PNES?

Your child may feel 1 or more of these:

- Anxious
- Worried
- Depressed
- Distant or isolated
- Not connected with others
- Cut off from emotions. They may have trouble explaining what they feel.
- Headaches, stomach aches and nausea

Your child may also have trouble:

- Talking with others.
- Coping with daily stress.
- Adjusting to new social settings or major life changes.

What treatment could my child have for PNES?

PNES respond to therapy. Research shows that more than half of people stop having PNES shortly after they start treatment. Your child may need to see a:

- Psychiatrist – a medical doctor who treats mental health or emotional problems.
- Psychologist – a professional with a doctorate level in psychology who treats mental health or emotional problems.
- Counselor – a master level professional who treats mental health or emotional problems.

Treatment may include:

- Non-invasive electroencephalogram (EEG) to make sure your child is not having epileptic seizures.

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Psychogenic non-epileptic seizures (PNES), continued

- Counseling to help your child learn ways to cope.
- Medicine to help with stress and other symptoms.

Parent teaching and training are advised. This is so you can help your child use coping skills in their daily life. The goals of counseling are to:

- Find and treat the cause of your child's stress.
- Improve how your child talks about their problems and feelings.
- Find out how to know when stress is building up.
- Find better ways to cope and solve problems.
- Find other outlets for stress.

The most common types of therapy used to treat PNES are:

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) – a form of psychotherapy that is a short-term, goal-oriented approach to problem-solving.
- Psychotherapy – talk therapy.
- Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) – combines CBT with mindfulness. Mindfulness means to focus on the present moment while being more aware and accepting of one's feelings and thoughts, as well as what is happening with one's body at that time.

Where can I get help for my child?

Your child may qualify for mental health treatment or counseling. For more information, call the Children's Comprehensive Epilepsy Center at 404-785-KIDS (5437) or talk with your child's doctor.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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