Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy (SUDEP)

What is SUDEP?

SUDEP is the sudden, unexpected death of a person with epilepsy. An autopsy does not show any other cause of death.

- About 1 out of every 1,000 people with epilepsy dies from SUDEP each year.
- It is less common in children, but it is still an important concern. About 1 out of every 4,500 children with epilepsy dies from SUDEP each year.

What causes SUDEP?

No one knows what causes SUDEP. One cause does not explain all SUDEP deaths. Most often, SUDEP:

- Happens at night or during sleep.
- May happen during or right after a seizure.

What are the risk factors?

The biggest risk factor for SUDEP is frequent seizures, especially generalized tonic-clonic seizures.

Other risk factors include:

- Epilepsy is not well-controlled.
- Epilepsy started at a young age.
- Having epilepsy for a long time.
- Not taking medicines on a regular basis or as prescribed.
- Stopping or changing medicines suddenly.
- Being 20 to 40 years old, but remember children can die from SUDEP, too. We do not know why SUDEP is less common in children.
- Developmental disability.
- Having an IQ score less than 70 (intellectual disability).

How can I lower my child's risk?

The best way to help prevent SUDEP is to control seizures.

- Make sure your child **takes their seizure medicine as prescribed.**
- Talk with your child's doctor about medicine changes or other options if your child keeps having seizures even when they take their medicine.

It is important to:

- Keep regular appointments with your child's doctor.
- Avoid seizure triggers if you know them.
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep.

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

 ©2026 Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, Inc. All rights reserved.

- Teach seizure first aid to adults in the house.
- Consider using a device that can pick up seizures when your child sleeps.
- Have your child try sleeping on their side or back, not their stomach.

What should I talk about with my child's doctor?

Yes, talk with your child's care team for support if you worry about:

- The risk of SUDEP.
- How best to balance keeping your child safe with encouraging your child's growth and independence.

Questions you may want to ask include:

- What risk does my child have for SUDEP?
- What can I do to lower my child's risk?
- What should I do if my child forgets to take his seizure medicine?
- What steps should I take if my child changes seizure medicine?
- What medicines give the best seizure control for my child?
- Are there any activities my child should not do?
- What instructions should I give family and friends if my child has a seizure?

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.

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

 ©2026 Children's Healthcare of Atlanta, Inc. All rights reserved.