

## What is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a neurological condition characterised by unusual electrical activity in the brain causing unprovoked seizures. A single seizure does not mean that you have epilepsy. A diagnosis by a neurologist needs to confirm this. It is not a psychological disorder, disease or illness and it is not contagious. The brain comprises billions of nerve cells (neurons) communicating through electrical and chemical signals. When there is a sudden excessive electrical discharge that disrupts the normal activity of the nerve cells, a seizure may result.

Epilepsy affects 1 in every 100 people in South Africa, i.e. approximately half a million South Africans based on a total estimated population of 52 million. If every person with epilepsy has 4 immediate family members, at least another 2 million South Africans are affected by the condition.

## Causes of epilepsy

In approximately 66% of cases the underlying cause of epilepsy is unknown. This is called idiopathic epilepsy. In the remaining cases the underlying cause(s) can be identified. This is called symptomatic epilepsy. The cause of symptomatic epilepsy can differ and include:

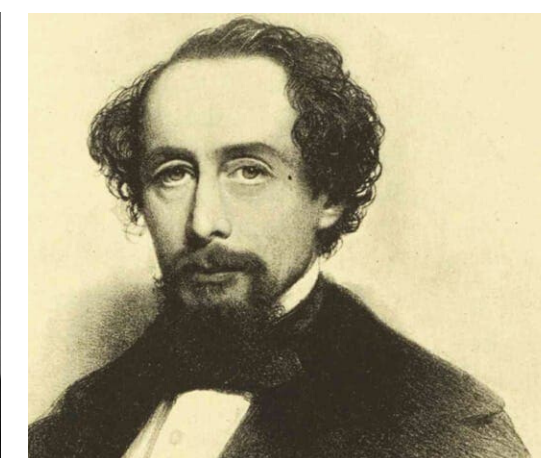
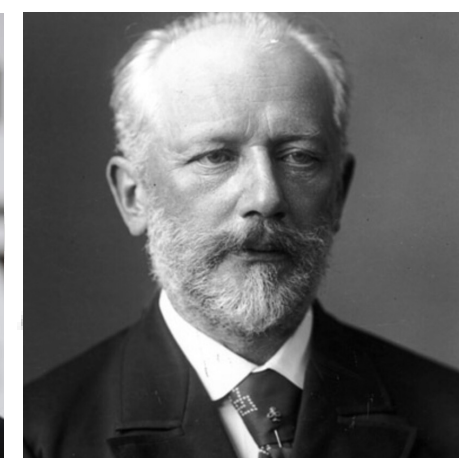
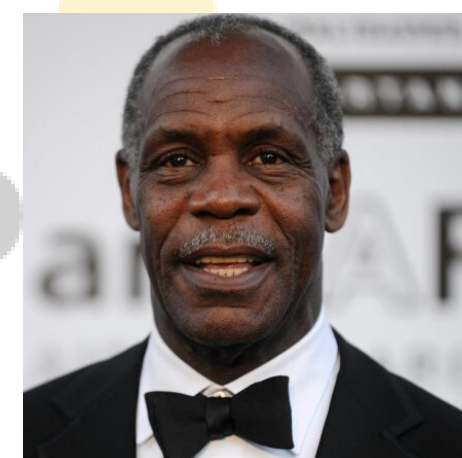
- Head injury which may occur at any age;
- Birth injury such as the lack of oxygen during the birth process;
- Alcohol and drug abuse;
- Degeneration (aging);
- Metabolic or biochemical disturbances or imbalance.

## Living with epilepsy

There are several misconceptions about epilepsy that inhibit the quality of life of a person with epilepsy:

- People with epilepsy cannot excel at things that require physical or intellectual work such as sport.
- People with epilepsy should be treated differently simply because of their condition.
- People have epilepsy because someone did something wrong (it is a punishment).
- People have epilepsy because they are bewitched.

Recreational activities are very important for socialising and happiness. With some adjustments people with epilepsy can enjoy activities that may be considered dangerous by many people. The truth is that the risks are often no greater for people with epilepsy than for others.



Epilepsy has not stood in the way of achievement for people like Danny Gover, Tchaikovsky, Charles Dickens, Agatha Christie, George Gershwin or Susan Boyle. For most people with epilepsy the biggest problem they have to face is the attitude of other people. What people with epilepsy need most is understanding and acceptance from the public.

## First aid for seizures

Medical help is usually not necessary, but should be sought if:

- Repetitive seizures occur without the person regaining consciousness in between.
- The seizure shows no sign of stopping after a few minutes.
- There is a physical injury during the seizure.
- Stay with him/her until fully recovered.

You can help by protecting the person from injury, cushioning their head, not restricting movement or putting anything in the mouth, laying the person on his/her side, & staying with him/her until fully recovered.