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Febrile Seizures

Febrile seizures (fever convulsions), although quite benign, can be frightening to parents. They are the single most common type of seizure in children, affecting 2% to 4% of youngsters before their fifth birthday. A febrile seizure is a convulsion in a healthy infant or young child that is associated with fever and a trivial infection.

What causes febrile seizures?

Although any infection can cause a fever convulsion, most of the time the germ is a virus and, although watching a child convulse is as scary as parenting gets, the infection is often a minor one.

In most children who develop a fever seizure, convulsions are seen within the first 24 hours after the illness begins; in many, seizure is the first sign of infection. Often parents have no clue that their child is sick until the seizure occurs. Only then will they realize that they have a "hot tot" on their hands. Also, the fever doesn't have to be very high for a child to convulse. A rapid rise in temperature, rather than the final degree of temperature, seems to play a role in triggering a convulsion. This means that a temperature that gradually rises from 98 to 104 might not cause a convulsion, whereas a quick spike from 98 to 101 might do it.

Who gets febrile seizures?

Although boys get them more often than girls, any child with fever can have a febrile seizure. Febrile convulsions are strongly age-dependent. Although they can occur anywhere from 3 months to 8 years of age, they are most common between 6 months and three years, with a peak right around 18 months.

Also, some children just seem predisposed to have seizures with fever, often because their parents or siblings had them as kids. Some kids with sharp temperature spikes will convulse, while others won't.

What does a febrile seizure look like?

The child with a febrile seizure has either body-jerking, sudden stiffening or even a sudden loss of muscle tone - a floppy seizure. Her eyes may roll up or she may stare to one side. She will not respond to her parents. Most often, the seizure lasts for one or two minutes - it can seem like much more to a frightened parent.

What do I do while my child is convulsing?

As scary as the seizure may be to a parent, there is actually very little to do while waiting the few minutes it takes for the convulsion to stop. Don't try to force something into your child's mouth so that she won't swallow her tongue. Tongues are "attached" - they can't be swallowed. Simply lay your child on her side on a soft surface or hold her upright in your arms. Soak a towel in tepid water (you don't need very cold water - as long as it's cooler than your child, it will help get the fever down) and wrap your child in this cool towel. Once she is no longer stiff, floppy or shaking, and is alert and responsive, you can give the appropriate dose of Tylenol or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil).

What's next?

It is important for a doctor to see a child after a seizure. This is to make certain that the infection that caused the seizure does not require medication. Although febrile convulsions are usually caused by viruses, which get better by themselves, in some cases an ear infection, a urinary infection or even a more serious infection can lead to a seizure, and we will need to rule these out.

Will it come back?

About 30% to 40% of children have a recurrence after a first febrile seizure. Even recurrences are benign and do not influence a child's general health and neurologic development. The younger the infant, the more likely that a febrile seizure will recur. Also, if a parent or sibling has had a seizure, then your child's febrile seizure is more likely to recur. In addition, each febrile episode increases the risk of recurrence by about 18%. In very rare cases (about 2%) children who have a fever convulsion can go on to have seizures without fever. Again, this is quite rare.

Can I prevent my child from having a febrile seizure?

Unfortunately, there is little to do. Since many febrile seizures occur at the very first fever spike, by the time you know your child is "hot," it's often too late to do anything. If your child has had a fever convulsion, you will want to treat any fever (101 or more) with tylenol or ibuprofen. In a few rare cases, a child with a history of repeated fever convulsions will require special medication to prevent a seizure. If your child has had two or more febrile seizures, discuss this possibility with us.



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