

# UNDERSTANDING EPILEPSY



AN OWNERS GUIDE TO UNDERSTANDING YOUR DOG'S EPILEPSY



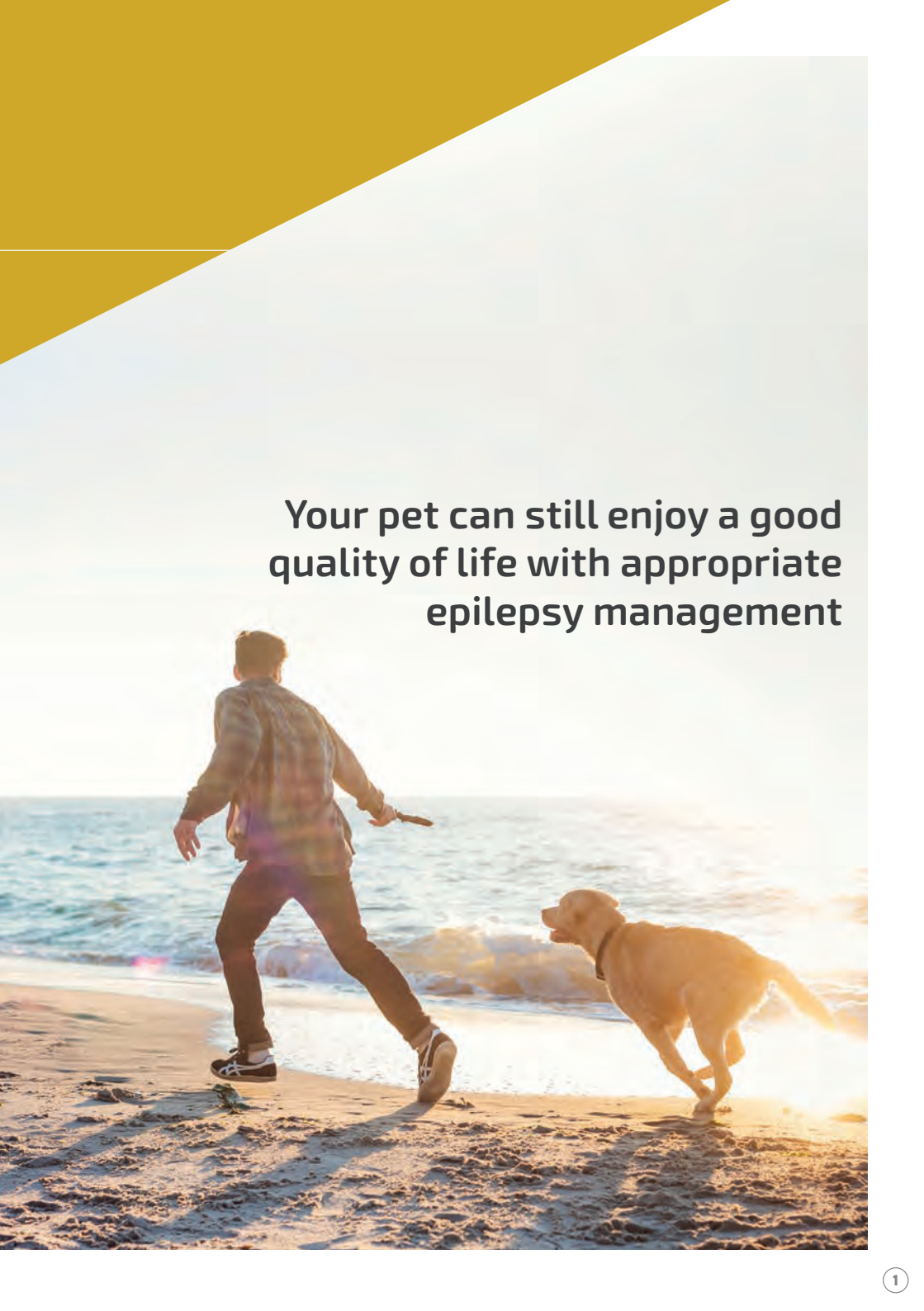
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**EPILEPTIC**  
PET [myepilepticpet.co.uk](http://myepilepticpet.co.uk)

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A photograph of a man and his dog running on a beach at sunset. The man is in the foreground, wearing a plaid shirt and dark pants, running towards the right. The dog is running alongside him, also towards the right. The background shows the ocean and a bright sunset sky. A large yellow triangle is in the top left corner.

**Your pet can still enjoy a good  
quality of life with appropriate  
epilepsy management**

## WHAT IS AN EPILEPTIC SEIZURE?



The brain is a delicate electrical network.



An epileptic seizure is where there is an overload of electrical activity in one part of the brain network.

Depending on the size and location of the electrical overload, the animal may suffer either a generalised seizure or a focal seizure:

**Generalised seizures** are easy to recognise: the animal lies on one side and makes paddling or running movements.

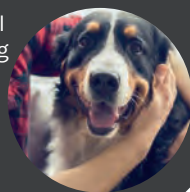
They are typically unconscious and may lose control of their bladder or bowels.

**Focal seizures** are harder to spot and usually involve only one part or side of the animal, with signs such as localised muscle twitching/spasms, or odd behaviour (e.g., random aggression, snapping at imaginary flies).

**Seizures do not always have a visible and identifiable trigger. They often happen when the animal is sleeping.**

## IS IT DANGEROUS FOR MY PET?

- Whilst they can appear scary, the vast majority of seizures are short-lived.
- They usually last less than 2 minutes and the physical exertion is similar to running a sprint.
- The animal is often unconscious and therefore isn't suffering during a seizure.
- Your pet may not feel themselves following a seizure.
- Be aware that your pet could injure themselves during a seizure.



A generalised seizure that lasts a long time (more than 5 minutes) or repeated seizures in quick succession can lead to a condition known as status epilepticus (continuous uninterrupted seizures) which can be life-threatening for your pet. **If this happens you should contact your vet immediately.**

## WHAT TO DO DURING A SEIZURE



### STAY CALM

An epileptic seizure often looks scary but is rarely life-threatening.

By staying calm, you will be able to help your pet recover quickly.



### CUSHION THE SURROUNDINGS

Move any objects from close to the pet that may fall or injure them. Make the area as quiet and dark as you can (turn off music or the TV, turn off the lights etc.).

Keep children and other pets away.



### CONTROL THE SITUATION

If your vet has prescribed an emergency use anticonvulsant, administer it to your pet (if possible).

If the seizure doesn't stop within a couple of minutes, or if more seizures happen in quick succession, you should contact your vet immediately.

## Following a seizure...

### Your pet may:



Be tired and need to rest.



Be disoriented and wander around.



Be agitated and run around.



Suffer temporary loss of vision.



Be hungry and thirsty.

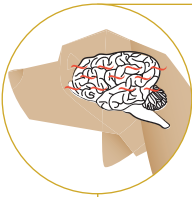


Be aggressive and may not recognise you.

THESE SIGNS OFTEN LAST A FEW MINUTES TO HOURS BUT CAN LAST SEVERAL DAYS. GIVE YOUR PET TIME TO RECOVER, BUT IF THEY DO NOT GO AWAY, CONTACT YOUR VET FOR ADVICE.

## WHY DOES MY PET HAVE EPILEPSY?

THERE ARE **3** MAIN CAUSES OF SEIZURES:



### IDIOPATHIC EPILEPSY (ALSO CALLED PRIMARY OR SPONTANEOUS EPILEPSY)

**This is the most common cause of epilepsy in dogs.**

The brain looks normal but is predisposed to generating seizures. This type of epilepsy can be genetic. Certain breeds (e.g. Labrador, Border Collie, Shepherds) are more prone to the condition than others.

It can happen at any age, but the first seizure is usually seen between 6 months and 6 years. It also affects cats, although there is currently no evidence of any genetic factor.



### STRUCTURAL EPILEPSY

These seizures are caused by damage to certain parts of the brain. The damage may have been present since birth, or have appeared later on (e.g. tumour, stroke).



### REACTIVE SEIZURES

In this case, the seizures are a symptom of a normal brain reacting to another problem within the body e.g. ingestion of a toxin/poison or a problem with an internal organ.

In fact, the brain needs to maintain a constant balance of nutrients, oxygen, vitamins, minerals and water in order for it to work properly.

Organ dysfunction can cause an imbalance and trigger a seizure e.g. low glucose (blood sugar) induced by a problem with the pancreas or liver.

## WHAT TESTS ARE NEEDED?

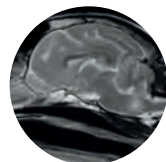
**The only way to truly determine the cause of the seizures is with further testing.**

What tests your pet needs varies between individuals and so to help them select the most appropriate treatment, the vet may advise one or more of the following tests:

**Blood tests** for a complete blood analysis and to make sure your pet's internal organs such as the liver and kidneys are working properly and to assess your pet's suitability for certain treatments.

**CSF tap:** this is where a sample of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) is taken. This is the fluid that surrounds the brain and spinal cord. This is usually performed by specialist veterinarians under a short general anaesthesia. This is to help detect any inflammatory or infectious cause of the seizures.

**MRI scan:** This is an instrument/tool used to take images of the entire brain in a painless and non-invasive manner. By looking at the images, the vet can see if there is any abnormalities within the brain e.g. tumours, inflamed areas or congenital problems that could be causing the seizures.



The procedure is usually performed by specialist veterinarians and under a short general anaesthesia.

## WILL MY PET GET BETTER?

Once diagnosed, your vet will suggest the most appropriate treatment for your pet. Sometimes the underlying cause of the seizure can be treated so that the seizures stop completely.

**However, with idiopathic epilepsy, it is unlikely that the seizures will stop completely and anti-epileptic treatment will usually be required to manage the seizures.**

You and your vet will decide on a treatment plan together, depending on the frequency and severity of the seizures.



Once the treatment is decided, it may be adjusted depending on how the epilepsy progresses and how your pet responds to the treatment.

It is likely that your pet will need this medication for the rest of their life.

**It is important that you do not stop or change the dose without consulting your vet.**

## HOW DOES ANTI-EPILEPTIC TREATMENT WORK?

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Anti-epileptic drugs all work by reducing the excitability of neurons in the brain, dampening down the excessive electrical stimulation in order to lower the risk of a seizure.

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The **medication will first be given at a starting dose**, which will then be adjusted based on how your pet responds. Your pet will likely have to take their medication twice per day, preferably at the same time each day (give or take an hour).




The treatment starts to work immediately. However, it **may not be fully effective until drug levels within the blood have stabilised** and this can take anywhere from one week to several months of treatment (depending on the drug). This is called Steady State.



EVERY ANIMAL IS UNIQUE AND SO IS THEIR TREATMENT PROTOCOL. THE ANTI-EPILEPTIC DRUG WILL BE CHOSEN BASED ON YOUR PET'S, BREED, SEIZURES AND DAILY ROUTINE ETC.






After an anti-epileptic medication has been prescribed, the vet may need to regularly adjust the medication and will likely follow a similar time-line to this:




**MEDICATION 1**    A follow up appointment is scheduled with your vet to discuss response to treatment and take blood samples.

**> If not effective enough:**

Gradually increase the dose up to the maximum possible (which may be several times higher than the starting dose).

**MEDICATION 1**   

**> If still not effective enough, add in another anti-epileptic drug:**

**MEDICATION 1**   **MEDICATION 2**  It is not uncommon for pets to be on multiple different anti-epileptic drugs.



THE VAST MAJORITY OF DOGS CAN BE MANAGED WITH A SINGLE MEDICATION, BUT OTHERS MAY NEED TWO OR MORE. In some rare cases of epilepsy, it may take time to find the optimal treatment or combination of medications to manage the disease.



**WHAT ARE THE AIMS OF TREATMENT?**

- The aim of anti-epileptic treatment is to:**
- ✓ Reduce the number of seizures
  - ✓ Reduce the duration of seizures
  - ✓ Reduce severity/intensity of seizures
  - ✓ Reduce the severity/intensity of post-seizure (post-ictal) signs
  - ✓ Ensure you and your pet can maintain a good quality of life.

Research shows that starting treatment early is beneficial and can potentially slow down the progression of the disease, but treatment is highly unlikely to stop the seizures completely.

**Your pet may have more seizures.**

This does not mean the treatment isn't working.

If your pet has more seizures, **record them using our free printed seizure diary, available to download from [myepilepticpet.co.uk](http://myepilepticpet.co.uk)** in order to determine their frequency and duration.

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If your pet has lots of seizures, talk to your vet who may be able to make dose adjustments to aid seizure control.

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**IN THE VAST MAJORITY OF CASES, TREATMENT IS FOR LIFE.** However, if your pet does not seizure for 1-2 years and depending on your pet and the cause of the seizures, your vet may suggest gradually reducing the dose. **However, you should never change the dose or stop the treatment without talking to your vet.**

## WILL THE TREATMENT HARM MY PET?

Just like any other medication, anti-epileptic drugs could be associated with side effects. By reducing the excitability of neurons, anti-epileptic drugs may have side effects such as:

- Tiredness
- Disorientation
- Loss of balance
- Increased appetite and thirst
- Increased frequency and volume of urination
- Less desire to play
- Being a bit lost or out of sorts

**These effects are often worse at the start of treatment or just after increasing the dose, and usually disappear over time as your pet becomes used to them.**

Although they may be worrying, these signs do not mean that they are harming your pet and you must never stop the treatment (without seeking your vet's advice).

There are rare reports of some medications affecting the liver, this is usually when doses exceed the maximum. Your vet will recommend regular blood tests to check for this.

### **What about homoeopathy, herbal medicine and essential oils?**

You may read or hear of these alternatives but they have no proven benefits for epilepsy. Neither are they free from risk and an overdose (especially essential oils) can cause poisoning.

In the first instance, it is advisable not to stop or change your pet's anti-epileptic medication, talk to your vet if you have any concerns regarding your pet's medication.



**UNCONTROLLED SEIZURES ARE MORE HARMFUL TO YOUR PET THAN THE POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS.**

However, if your pet experiences too many side effects, your vet may be able to suggest ways to help reduce these.

## HOW AND WHY SHOULD I MONITOR MY PET?

As with any long term illness, regular monitoring is needed to ensure seizure control and prevent possible complications.

### AT HOME

✓ Give the treatment at the dose stated by your vet.

✓ Record any seizures (date, time, duration, intensity, description, any warning signs, length of recovery phase etc.).

✓ Record any change in your pet's behaviour (tiredness, increased thirst, changes in appetite etc.).

✓ Follow your vet's advice if a seizure does happen.

✓ Let your vet know immediately if a seizure lasts more than 3-5 minutes or if your pet has multiple in a short period of time.



### YOUR VET WILL

✓ Make a follow-up appointment a few weeks after starting or adjusting the treatment.

✓ Schedule regular examinations and blood tests to check organ function.

✓ Check the blood levels of the anti-epileptic drug.

✓ Adjust the treatment if needed.

✓ Schedule an epilepsy check-up at least once a year.



**Call your vet** if your pet's epilepsy gets worse or if any new symptoms appear.

## WHAT FOOD SHOULD I GIVE MY PET?

An animal's diet is important for its health and can affect how well the treatment works. Follow these recommendations:



Give a balanced, high-quality diet.



A change in salt content may affect how well certain drugs work: make sure your pet's diet is consistent each day.



Watch out for any weight gain which can also affect the treatment.  
If your pet has a big appetite, consider a calorie-controlled diet.

It is advised to discuss any diet change, including the additional of supplements, with your vet before starting. Any diet change should be slow and gradual.



**FOOD AND/OR DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS SHOULD NEVER REPLACE TREATMENT. DO NOT STOP YOUR PET'S MEDICATION WITHOUT CONSULTING YOUR VET!**

## HOW CAN THE INTERNET HELP ME MANAGE MY PET'S CONDITION?

The internet contains a huge wealth of information.

By surfing the web you can find out more about your pet's condition.

- ⚠ Warning: be critical of information you find and follow certain rules:
- ✓ Only use reputable and dedicated websites.
- ✓ Avoid unmoderated forums.

### ASK YOUR VET FOR RELIABLE AND REPUTABLE SOURCES



Visit: [myepilepticpet.co.uk](https://myepilepticpet.co.uk)

A comprehensive and reliable site on epilepsy in pets.



**REMEMBER THAT EVERY EPILEPTIC PET IS UNIQUE AND WHAT WORKS FOR ONE MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE FOR EVERYONE.**

If you come across any interesting ideas on the internet, discuss them with your vet first to see if they could work.

**HOW SHOULD I TALK TO MY CHILDREN AND FRIENDS ABOUT MY PET'S CONDITION?**

**A seizure can be scary for anyone who witnesses it.** It would be sensible to talk about it with your children, pet sitters, or friends.

### **Tell them the main facts about the condition:**

**How and why** seizures occur, it might be useful to show them the explanations provided in this booklet (page 2).

Explain that your pet will probably have seizures throughout their life but with treatment, hopefully they won't happen very often.

**Despite the seizures, your pet can live a normal and happy life.**

**SHOULD I TELL THE BREEDER?**



Even though they are not responsible, it is important to tell the breeder and enquire about the existence of epilepsy in the pet's ancestors, offspring or litter mates.

The fact that in some breeds the condition is genetic, the breeder can take the information you provide into account when breeding.

If your pet is registered with the Kennel Club, you can also contact them to advise of the possible risk within the breeding line.

## **Key things to remember if you witness a seizure:**

- ✓ **The seizure probably won't last that long and will likely stop by itself.**
- ✓ **Your pet is not suffering** (even though it may make worrying noises and movements, just like a bad dream).
- ✓ Remember the **Three Cs** (stay Calm /Cushion the surroundings/Control the situation).
- ✓ **Following a seizure, your pet may be tired or aggressive.**  
Leave them alone and don't try to comfort them if they don't want it.



## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **DO I HAVE TO GIVE THE TREATMENT AT THE SAME TIME EACH DAY?**

Yes, as far as possible. However slight variation in the timing is acceptable. Treatment is often given in several doses throughout the day. It is important to stick to this regimen.

### **MY DOG TAKES MULTIPLE TABLETS EVERY MORNING AND EVENING. IS THAT A LOT?**

No. The number of tablets is not important. What matters is achieving the right levels of drug within the blood. Your vet can check this by taking a blood sample.

Some animals need to take more tablets than others in order to achieve this.

### **IF MY PET VOMITS OR REGURGITATES AFTER TAKING THE TABLETS, SHOULD I GIVE THEM AGAIN?**

If your pet vomits after the medication, before giving another dose, consult your vet. They will assess the situation and advise you whether to give it again or to skip a dose depending on the risk to your pet.

### **DOES IT MATTER IF I MISS A DOSE?**

It is important not to forget your pet's treatment. If you miss a dose and realise it within 2 hours, you can give the forgotten dose straight away. Otherwise, continue with the next dose as normal. Depending on what drugs your pet has been prescribed, a missed dose may result in a seizure, so it is always best to contact your vet for advice.





### **THE TREATMENT IS MAKING MY PET ILL. SHOULD I STOP IT?**

No, there is usually mild and transient side effects at first but these usually go away after a couple of weeks.

You should never suddenly stop giving the treatment without first talking to your vet because there is a risk of worsening the seizures. If the side effects don't go away, your vet may suggest ways to reduce these or, if necessary, changing dose or medication.

### **IF MY PET IS OFF-COLOUR ONE DAY, CAN I REDUCE THE DOSE?**

No. This will have the opposite effect and could risk causing a seizure. You should continue to give the prescribed dose and contact your vet for further advice.

### **MY PET IS HUNGRY ALL THE TIME. WHAT SHOULD I DO?**

Despite this hunger, do not give them more food than usual; any changes in weight can affect the treatment.

If your pet is very hungry, talk to your vet about giving a special low-calorie diet and/or bulking up their food with low calorie vegetables to make them feel full.

### **WHY ARE BLOOD TESTS NEEDED?**

As with most long-term conditions, regular blood tests are needed to check that the internal organs are working correctly. Your vet may also be able to check the amount of the medication in your pet's blood.

### **I DON'T THINK THE MEDICATION IS WORKING. SHOULD I CHANGE IT?**

Treatment can take several weeks or even months to reach their full effectiveness. You should therefore wait before concluding it's not working. If it does not work as well as expected, your vet will probably look to increase the dose before trying/adding in something else.

**You should never stop or change your pet's treatment without checking with the vet first.**

### **THE INTERNET SAYS THERE IS ANOTHER MEDICINE THAT WORKS BETTER. CAN I SWAP TREATMENTS?**

There is no one miracle cure. What works for one animal may not work for another. Any change of treatment is risky and can make the epilepsy worse. If you have discovered an interesting alternative, talk to your vet.

### **IS IT DANGEROUS IF MY PET NEEDS TO BE PUT UNDER ANAESTHETIC?**

No anaesthetic is without its risk, but your vet will adjust the protocol for your pet to make it as safe as possible.

### **CAN I LEAVE MY PET ON HIS OWN BECAUSE IF HE HAS A SEIZURE, I WON'T BE THERE?**

Yes, it is encouraged that owners of epileptic pets live their lives as normal and it is impossible to be with your pet 24/7.

Remember most seizures are usually very short and stop by themselves. Whilst you are gone, it is advisable to leave your pet in a suitable safe place.

# WHAT IS MY ROLE IN MANAGING MY PET'S EPILEPSY?

Dealing with epilepsy can be difficult and frustrating. A seizure can be scary and shocking to see, the treatment can take time to get right. The disease is unpredictable. It is impossible to predict seizures, and long periods of calm are often followed by a relapse without anything having changed.

**Over time, you will learn how best to manage the condition and be able to cope with your pet's seizures.**

Remember that you cannot stop a seizure, even if you could watch your pet 24/7. Giving your pet their medication as prescribed is the best thing you can do to help your pet. With appropriate management, your pet can live a long and healthy life.

## Your role in managing your pet's epilepsy:



- ✔ **Give the treatment** as instructed by your vet.
- ✔ **Keep an accurate record** of all seizures and other symptoms.
- ✔ **Attend the check-ups** with your vet.
- ✔ Give your pet **love and support**.
- ✔ **Protect your pet** during seizures and don't feel guilty if you can't be there.
- ✔ **Be patient and confident**.
- ✔ **Talk to your vet** and other people going through the same thing.
- ✔ **Remember the 3 C's during a seizure.**



EPILEPSY IS A MANAGEABLE CONDITION AND IN THE MAJORITY OF CASES THERE ARE VETERINARY MEDICINES THAT CAN IMPROVE YOUR PET'S HEALTH. WITH TIME AND PATIENCE, YOU WILL FIND WHAT WORKS BEST FOR YOUR PET.

# APPOINTMENT RECORD

Date:

| 20

Date of first seizure:

| 20

Tests carried out:

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Treatment given:

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Seizure management goals:

Reduce frequency:

Reduce duration:

Reduce severity:

Reduce duration of recovery phase:

Date of follow-up appointment:

| 20

Until then, we suggest that you:

- ✔ Give the treatment as instructed.
- ✔ Keep a seizure diary.

**Remember** the golden rules for managing a seizure:



STAY CALM



CUSHION THE SURROUNDINGS



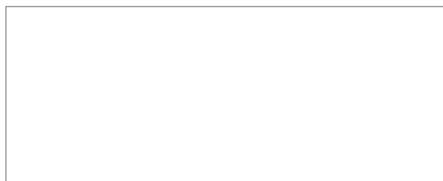
CONTROL THE SITUATION

YOU CAN DOWNLOAD OUR SEIZURE DIARY HERE:

[myepilepticpet.co.uk](http://myepilepticpet.co.uk)



**Call the vet** if the seizures worsen (frequency, duration, severity) or if you have any questions about the treatment.



# WHAT TO DO DURING A SEIZURE?



## STAY CALM

The seizure should not last long and should stop by itself. Your pet is not suffering.



## CUSHION THE SURROUNDINGS

Make sure your pet can't hurt themselves. Keep any children and other pets away.



## CONTROL THE SITUATION

If the seizure doesn't stop within a couple of minutes, or if more seizures happen in quick succession, you should contact your vet immediately.