

Sleeping on stomach may increase risk of sudden death in epilepsy

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Generalized 3 Hz spike and wave discharges in a child with childhood absence epilepsy. Credit: Wikipedia.

New research shows that stomach sleepers with epilepsy may be at higher risk of sudden unexpected death, drawing parallels to sudden infant death syndrome in babies. The study is published in the January 21, 2015, online issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes repeated seizures and affects an estimated 50 million people worldwide.

"Sudden unexpected death is the main cause of death in uncontrolled epilepsy and usually occurs unwitnessed during sleep," said study author James Tao, MD, PhD, with the University of Chicago in Illinois and a member of the American Academy of Neurology.

People with [tonic clonic seizures](#) (formerly known as grand mal seizures) that affect the entire brain are more likely to die suddenly than people with [partial seizures](#) that affect an area of the brain.

For the study, researchers reviewed 25 studies that included 253 [sudden unexpected death](#) cases where body position was recorded.

The study found that 73 percent of the cases died in the stomach sleep position, whereas 27 percent died in other sleep positions. Looking at a subgroup of 88 people, researchers found that people younger than 40 were four times more likely to be found on their stomachs at the time of [sudden death](#) than people over 40. A total of 86 percent of those under 40 were [sleeping](#) on their stomachs, compared to 60 percent for those over the age of 40.

"We're not sure why this was more common in younger people," Tao said. "It may be that they are more likely to be single and not have anyone with them during a seizure while sleeping." He noted that a person sleeping with someone who has a generalized tonic clonic seizure

while on their stomach should help them turn over or on the side during or after the seizure.

A total of 11 cases of sudden death have occurred while the people were being monitored with video EEG and their sleeping position was recorded. In all of those cases, all the people were died in a prone position, and most of these people were sleeping on their stomachs before the terminal seizures.

"Similar to infant SIDS cases, adults often have an impaired ability to wake up after a seizure, especially a general seizure," Tao said.

"Our findings highlight an important strategy for preventing sudden unexpected death in epilepsy—that 'back is best,'" Tao said. "Using wrist watches and bed alarms designed to detect [seizures](#) during sleep may also help prevent these deaths."

Provided by American Academy of Neurology

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