

I have a 10-year-old Boston terrier that has been pretty healthy. However, over the past 2 weeks he has had 2 episodes where he was walking normally and then fell over. He seems to kick his legs a little and will usually urinate after he falls to the ground. After a few minutes he gets up and is back to normal. I looked online for the causes and I think it may be a seizure or syncopal episode. How do I know which one it is?

Seizures and syncopal episodes can look very similar but the causes and treatment are very different. It is important that your dog be seen by your veterinarian as soon as possible to discuss what is happening and get him started on medications to help prevent future episodes.

Seizures (or convulsions) are sudden, excessive firing of nerves in the brain that result in contraction of muscles, abnormal behaviors, and abnormal sensations. The seizure is not the disease, but is a symptom of a neurologic disorder. Causes of seizures include low blood sugar, toxins, liver disease, inflammatory or infectious diseases affecting the nervous system, brain tumors, and others. While many seizures are very short, some can last minutes and be life threatening due to the increased body temperature and brain damage that results. While the severity can vary, they are often described as the dog laying down, drooling, barking, paddling the limbs, urinating and possibly defecating.

Syncopal episodes are a brief period of unconsciousness due to a lack of blood flow or oxygen to the brain causing a pet to collapse. Similar to seizures, syncope is a symptom, not a diagnosis of heart disease. Often, the cause is an electrical disturbance of the heart or a structural problem with the heart. Disorders affecting the sac that covers the heart can also cause syncope. Syncopal episodes are described as sudden weakness that may progress to incoordination and result in collapse. The fainting is often associated with activity or exercise. Some episodes are described as involving stiffness of the legs with the head pulled back and loss of urinary control which is similar to a seizure.

With both conditions, it is important for your veterinarian to perform an examination and determine the cause of the signs you are seeing. Diagnostics that may be needed to include blood tests, urinalysis, ECG, blood pressure measurement and possibly others. If you are able to take a video when your dog is having an episode, bring that along to your visit. Call your veterinarian today to schedule an appointment.

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