

# Views of Epilepsy Have Undergone Profound Changes in Last 3 Decades

By George Gallup

PRINCETON, N.J. — The public's views on epilepsy have undergone profound changes over the last three decades.

In 1949, 45 percent of American adults believed that epileptics should not be discriminated against in employment. Today, 79 percent hold this opinion.

In 1949, 24 percent said they would object to having their children go to school or play with epileptic children. Today, only six percent would object.

In 1949, 13 percent of persons interviewed thought epilepsy was a form of insanity. Today, the comparable figure is only three percent.

While public opinion on epilepsy in general has softened considerably over the years, there is less tolerance when it comes to one's child marrying an epileptic. Another survey question shows that about one person in five (18 percent) would object to having a son or daughter marry a person who sometimes has seizures.

Persons with a college background (12 percent) and adults under 30 (nine percent) are least likely to express an objection.

The latest survey shows that a very high proportion of Americans, 95 percent, have heard or read about epilepsy. Six in 10 (63 percent) say they have known someone who has epilepsy, and a similar proportion (59 percent) say they have seen a person having a seizure.

Following are the questions asked, the principal findings, and the trend in public attitudes since 1949:

*Have you ever heard or read about the disease called epilepsy or convulsive seizures (fits)?*

Awareness of Epilepsy	
LATEST	95%
1974	94
1969	94
1964	95
1959	93
1954	90
1949	92

*Did you ever know anyone who had epilepsy?*

	Know Anyone With Epilepsy?		
	Yes	No	Not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
LATEST	63	32	5
1974	62	32	6
1949	57	35	8

*Have you ever seen anyone who was having a seizure (fit)?*

	Seen Someone Having a Seizure?		
	Yes	No	Not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
LATEST	59	36	5
1974	60	34	6
1949	56	36	8

*Do you think epileptics should or should not be employed in jobs like other people?*

	Should Epileptics Be Employed?		
	Should	Should not	Don't know or not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
LATEST	79	9	12
1974	81	8	11
1969	76	12	12
1964	82	9	9
1959	75	11	14
1954	60	22	18
1949	45	35	20

*Would you object to having any of your children in school, or at play, associate with persons who sometimes had seizures (fits)?*

	Object to Children Playing with Epileptics?		
	Yes	No	Don't know or not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
LATEST	6	84	10
1974	5	84	11
1969	9	81	10
1964	13	77	10
1959	18	67	15
1954	17	68	15
1949	24	57	19

*Do you think epilepsy is a form of insanity, or not?*

**Epilepsy a Form of Insanity?**

	Yes	No	Don't know or not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
LATEST	3	86	11
1974	2	86	12
1969	4	81	15
1964	4	79	17
1959	4	74	22
1954	7	68	25
1949	13	59	28

While the public's knowledge about the possible causes of epilepsy is still fairly low, it has increased in the years since 1949. Moreover, the percentage attributing epilepsy to a brain or nervous system disorder has risen with a general increase in familiarity with the disease.

*What do you think is the cause of epilepsy?*

**Cause of Epilepsy**

	1949	1959	1969	1974	LATEST
	%	%	%	%	%
Brain, nervous system disorder	22	27	30	26	37
Heredity, birth defect	12	13	19	15	16
Other diseases, injury	—	—	7	7	7
Mental or emotional	1	—	4	3	2
Blood disorder	2	1	3	2	1
Miscellaneous	7	4	2	4	2
Don't know	57	58	40	41	39

The following question was asked for the first time in 1980:

*Would you object to having a son or daughter of yours marry a person who sometimes has seizures (fits)?*

**Object to Marriage with Epileptic?**

	Yes	No	Don't know or not familiar with epilepsy
	%	%	%
NATIONAL	17	64	19
Men	19	62	19
Women	15	67	18
College	12	78	10
High school	17	64	19
Grade school	29	39	32
18-29 years	9	74	17
30-49 years	12	72	16
50 and older	29	50	21

Dr. William F. Caveness, Chief of the Laboratory of Experimental Neurology of the National Institute of Neurological and Communicative Disorders and Stroke, in assessing the significance of the survey data, cites five major factors which he feels have led to a more favorable public attitude toward epilepsy:

1. More enlightened views of the public toward "dread" diseases, such as cancer, tuberculosis, insanity, syphilis, and epilepsy.
2. Improved medical control of epileptic seizures.
3. Educational efforts on the part of the medical professional and lay associations concerning epilepsy.
4. A reasonable modification in legal restrictions concerning epileptics in terms of immigration, marriage, and the operation of motor vehicles.
5. Programs for the employment of epileptics in a number of major American industries.

Impressive headway has been made in recent years in research, diagnosis and treatment of epilepsy, with the result that about half of the nation's two million epileptics are free of seizures and an additional 30 percent have improved control over their seizures.

The medical progress includes new drugs, widespread use of sophisticated diagnostic equipment and a new laboratory technique that determines the right dosage of medication for an individual.

Epilepsy is a disorder of the nervous system in which some brain cells are electrically abnormal. These cells sporadically produce electrical impulses that trigger bodily responses, which are termed seizures.

Researchers are looking for the biochemical explanations of how epileptic cells become abnormal, why they generate electrical activity and how the electrical impulse spreads from the abnormal cells to adjacent normal cells.

The main known causes of epilepsy are head injuries, infections, damage to the brain before or during birth, metabolic and nutritional disorders and brain tumors. For many people, epilepsy cannot be traced to a specific cause. Contrary to a widely held notion that epilepsy is often inherited, heredity is thought to play a modest role.

The stigma of epilepsy "stems from public misconceptions that equate epilepsy with mental illness, mental retardation, violence and even possession by the devil," according to Dr. Caveness. A definitive report of the latest findings will appear in an upcoming issue of the scientific journal, *Epilepsia*.

Beginning in 1949, and at regular five-year intervals since that time, the Gallup Poll as a public service has conducted a national in-depth survey of public attitudes toward epilepsy at the instance of Drs. Caveness, William G. Lennox, and Houston Merritt.

The results reported today are based on two surveys, each consisting of personal interviews with over 1,500 adults, 18 and older, in more than 300 scientifically-selected localities across the nation, conducted during October 1979 and January 1980.

For results based on samples of this size, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects could be three percentage points in either direction.