

Epilepsy - lifestyle issues

Epilepsy is a common neurological condition in which a person has a tendency to have recurring seizures. People diagnosed with epilepsy naturally wonder what impact epilepsy may have on their lifestyle. Epilepsy is not the same for everyone and it is important to start by understanding your own epilepsy.

The cause of epilepsy and the type of seizures experienced will vary from person to person. The impact of seizures will also depend on the lifestyle of each individual. For some people, epilepsy may have little effect on their lifestyle. For other people, even a few seizures may mean that risks have to be considered and changes made.

Understand your diagnosis

If you have been diagnosed with epilepsy, it is important to understand what this means for you and why the diagnosis has been made. Choose a doctor who you are comfortable talking to. You should feel you can discuss any concerns freely, so you can work together to find a treatment program that suits you. If you understand your epilepsy, you will also be able to make informed decisions about your lifestyle and any changes that you may need to make.

Medications

Taking regular medication does not always fit easily into everyone's daily routine. Plan ahead so you don't run out of medication or find yourself away from home without your usual dose.

If you experience side effects from your medication, such as tiredness, weight changes or a skin rash, discuss these symptoms with your doctor. There are several medications that can be tried and it may take time to find the best treatment for you. Once your seizures become well controlled do not switch to a cheaper brand, even if it is offered by your pharmacist – you could experience a break-through seizure or troubling side effects.

Employment

A diagnosis of epilepsy does not automatically exclude people from most jobs. Most employers are interested in your skills, abilities, qualifications and experience. Your epilepsy is only relevant if you have seizures that are likely to interfere with your ability to do your job.

The Equal Opportunity Act and the Disability Discrimination Act legally protect people with epilepsy from discrimination.

In some cases, there are laws that would prevent you following a particular career. If the work is dangerous and your seizures are not well controlled, you could be at risk of injury.

Driving

If you have epilepsy, you will be able to hold a car driver's licence or a learner's permit as long as your seizures are well controlled. National driving guidelines have been developed to assist with the assessment of applications from people with epilepsy. The period during which you must be seizure-free before driving depends on your type of seizures and the circumstances surrounding any recent seizure you might have had.

There are laws about driving after seizures. In most cases, people who have had a seizure are required to notify the licensing body and stop driving until a medical report is supplied. Most people can return safely to driving once their seizures have become controlled, but the length of time a person must wait varies depending on their seizure circumstances.

Sport and leisure

Epilepsy does not prevent people from participating in most leisure activities. If an activity is considered potentially risky, it is best assessed on an individual basis. Activities may be able to be adapted, or additional safety precautions put in place, to reduce the risk to an acceptable level. Swimming, for example, is a form of exercise enjoyed by many people, including those with epilepsy. People with epilepsy need to be supervised when swimming and the supervising person needs to be capable of rescuing the person if they have a seizure in the water.

Travel

If you plan to travel overseas, ask your doctor how you can make sure you have enough medication for your trip. Ask your doctor for a letter confirming your diagnosis and treatment, in case you are admitted to hospital in another country, and seek advice about adjusting your medication regime during changes in time zones to reduce the likelihood of seizures. Remember, sleep deprivation can be a powerful trigger and you will be more vulnerable to seizure activity in these circumstances.

Choose your travel insurance carefully, as insurance companies vary in the way they assess cover and in the charges that apply when there is a pre-existing medical condition. The Chronic Illness Alliance has useful information about travel insurance for people with chronic disorders (www.chronicillness.org.au).

Seizure triggers

Some people notice a link between their lifestyle and seizures. Some possible triggers, which may provoke seizures include:

- Lack of sleep
- Alcohol
- Recreational drugs
- Stress.

These triggers are not the same for everyone and it may take some time to recognise their connection with your seizures, especially if your seizures are infrequent. Although reducing triggers may be helpful, it is important not to assume that all seizures are due to lifestyle factors. Tell your doctor if you continue to experience seizures because further changes to your medical management may be necessary.

Alcohol

Epilepsy shouldn't stop you from having the occasional beer or a glass of wine with dinner. Most people with epilepsy can drink a moderate amount of alcohol. Moderate drinking means having two standard drinks a day. A standard drink is equal to:

- One small glass of wine (100ml)
- One stubby of full strength beer (285ml)
- One nip of spirits (30ml).

Alcohol and antiepileptic medications interact in specific ways. These medications can make people drowsier if they drink alcohol. Alcohol may also reduce the effectiveness of the medication, making seizures more likely. The interaction of alcohol and antiepileptic medication makes driving more hazardous and people should avoid driving in these circumstances.

Excessive drinking can result in poor seizure control and some people find that even small amounts of alcohol can trigger seizures. Ask your doctor about the interaction of alcohol with the medication you have been prescribed.

Flashing lights and computers

Many people mistakenly believe that everyone with epilepsy will have seizures triggered by flashing lights, computers or video games. In fact, only 5–7 per cent of people with epilepsy has this response, which is called photosensitivity. This reaction can also be triggered by natural light sources, such as sunlight flickering between trees.

You can check your work and home environments to identify and fix any problem areas or equipment. There are also some simple strategies that can be used to reduce the risk of a seizure if you are exposed to a potential light trigger. Wearing wrap-around Polaroid sunglasses are of some benefit for people who are photosensitive. Photosensitivity should not prevent you carrying out most of the normal daily activities of work and leisure.

Stress

Stress is a normal part of life. Extreme stress, however, may trigger seizures in some people. It is important to recognise your own signs and symptoms of stress and to use strategies that you find helpful to reduce your stress levels.

Intimate relationships

Epilepsy should not stop you from having an intimate relationship and enjoying sexual intercourse. In some cases, your medication may affect your desire for sex. This is usually treatable, so see your doctor or neurologist. If you are worried about these issues, you might find it helpful to discuss your concerns with an epilepsy counsellor.

Contraception

Some antiepileptic drugs can reduce the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill and increase the risk of an unplanned pregnancy. Your neurologist, gynaecologist or general practitioner can help you decide what the best form of contraception is for you.

Pregnancy

Get some good medical advice before you get pregnant. Avoiding an unplanned pregnancy is very important for women with epilepsy. Antiepileptic drugs increase the risk of abnormalities in a developing baby and it is important to talk to your doctor about the best way to prepare for your pregnancy and minimise any risks. Having your antiepileptic drugs reviewed and changed prior to conception reduces the risk of abnormalities. Medication can often be reduced but most women need to stay on some medication because seizures during pregnancy can also be harmful to the developing baby. The aim is to achieve good seizure control with the most appropriate medication for you and your future baby. Folate supplements will usually be recommended to help protect your baby against neural tube defects (spina bifida).

If you have an unplanned pregnancy, do not stop your medication as this could provoke seizures. Speak to your doctor immediately.

Some forms of epilepsy are caused by genetic abnormalities. This is a complex topic that is best discussed with your doctor. If you are planning a baby and you are wondering if your child might have an increased risk of developing epilepsy, ask your doctor to explain any risks in your case. Those people with a strong family history of epilepsy are at greatest risk of inheriting epilepsy. A genetic abnormality that may cause epilepsy might also occur in an individual with no family history of epilepsy. Sometimes people are referred to a genetic clinic for an assessment of the risk of passing on a genetic abnormality to their children.

General wellbeing

If you have been diagnosed with epilepsy, it is not unusual to feel some anxiety, sadness or concern about the situation – this is a very normal reaction. Whatever your age, you will be wondering how best to manage this new challenge. Learning as much as you can about your epilepsy may help you to feel more confident about managing the condition. A wide range of information and support is available.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Neurologist
- Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria Tel. (03) 9805 9111
- Epilepsy Helpline Tel. 1300 852 853

Things to remember

- Epilepsy is varied and the effect on an individual will depend on the type of epilepsy and seizures and their impact on the unique lifestyle of each person.
- Learn about your own epilepsy so that you can make informed decisions about your lifestyle.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Epilepsy Foundation of Victoria Incorporated

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