

Epilepsy will have an impact on your life, but you can minimise that impact by recognising those issues that affect you and managing them in a positive way.

Driving

Being diagnosed with epilepsy and having to give up your licence for a time can throw your life into disarray, particularly if your job involves driving. But it may be for a relatively short period and once your seizures are controlled you will be able to drive again safely and legally. A diagnosis of epilepsy doesn't mean that you can never drive. You can hold a driver's licence or learner's permit as long as your seizures are well controlled. If you believe that you qualify for a licence or learner's permit, you are encouraged to apply. (For further information and guidelines see *Driving, page 17 and 18.*)

Alcohol

For those people who enjoy a social drink, epilepsy shouldn't stop you having the occasional beer or two or a glass of wine with dinner. Most people with epilepsy can safely drink a small amount of alcohol, however some people find even small amounts of alcohol can trigger seizures. The credo 'all things in moderation' applies here. Moderate drinking means having 2 standard drinks a day. A standard drink is equal to:

- one small glass of wine (100ml),
- one middy of full strength beer (285ml),
- one nip of spirits (30ml)

Be aware of the quantity of alcohol you drink and don't let anyone persuade you to drink more. Alcohol and antiepileptic medications interact in specific ways. AEDs can make you more sensitive to the sedating effects of alcohol while alcohol reduces the effectiveness of AEDs making seizures more likely.

Excessive drinking can result in poor seizure control due to late nights, missed meals, or forgotten doses, while 'hangover' seizures are likely to occur as the alcohol level in the blood falls. Some antiepileptic medications specifically recommend that you not drink while taking them and some neurologists expect their patients to follow this restriction to the letter – especially until they get their seizures under control. Ask your doctor about the effects of drinking alcohol with the medication you have been prescribed.

Recreational drugs

Street drugs such as cannabis, ecstasy, heroin, amphetamines or solvents can trigger seizures and when combined with a change in lifestyle that involves late nights and alcohol your risk of seizures is greatly increased.

Recreational drugs can be made up of many different ingredients. These drugs are illegal and there are no regulations to control quality.

Sex

Lots of people worry unnecessarily about whether or not it is safe to have sex when they have epilepsy or when their partner has epilepsy. Millions of people living with epilepsy – either their own or that of a partner – will happily attest to the fact that their sex lives are just fine. (For further information see *Men, page 24 and Women page 19.*)

The contraceptive pill

Some medications for epilepsy can reduce the effectiveness of the contraceptive pill. (For more information see *Women and Epilepsy, page 19.*)

Having children

Most women with epilepsy are able to have children without complications. Careful medical management is important because seizures during pregnancy and antiepileptic medication may pose a risk to the baby's health. So if you are planning to become pregnant, we strongly recommend that you discuss pregnancy with your doctor prior to conception. Some forms of epilepsy are inherited but most are not. Your neurologist or a genetic counsellor can give you information about epilepsy and inheritance. (For more information see *Women and Epilepsy, page 19.*)

Safety matters

The potential risk in everyday activities depends very much on the individual nature of your epilepsy. You may still have to adjust your lifestyle to minimise or remove the risks that epilepsy can bring for you and those in your care. If your seizures are not fully controlled or are unpredictable, everyday activities such as climbing ladders, using power tools, taking overly hot baths or showers, ironing and standing by the fire may pose a risk. Many of these risks can be minimised by adopting often simple safety measures within the home. (See *safety issues page 13 and 14.*)

Night clubs

If you enjoy the social atmosphere of nightclubs, being diagnosed with epilepsy does not mean you have to give up going out with your friends. Strobe lighting or flashing lights, can in some people, trigger seizures. This is known as photosensitive epilepsy. However it is quite rare and affects only a very small number of people with epilepsy. Nightclubs and DJs generally display warnings if strobe lighting is used. If this is a trigger for you, it would be advisable to avoid such clubs. If flashing lights make you feel uncomfortable, closing or covering one eye can lessen this discomfort.

Identification

The decision about whether to wear or carry some form of medical identification is a very personal one. A medical bracelet or necklace or a card for your purse or wallet, stating your name, address and medical condition, can improve your chances of accurate medical treatment in the event of a seizure occurring outside your home.

Television and Computer Games

Unless you have been diagnosed with photosensitive epilepsy, watching television, using a computer or playing video games should not affect you. However, if your seizures are triggered by photic stimuli there are things you can do to minimise the risk of seizures. Watch TV in a well-lit room and do not sit too close or directly in front of the screen. When playing computer games, sit 2.5m from the screen, again in a well-lit room and reduce the brightness of the display. If a seizure is to occur it is more likely to happen within the first 30 minutes of play. Generally, playing the game for prolonged periods doesn't pose a risk unless it is for so long that you become sleep deprived. Sleep deprivation is a recognised seizure trigger.

Travel

- Having a regular supply of medication is most important for anyone travelling away from home for any period of time. It is prudent to carry a copy of your prescription with you. If something unforeseen happens to your medication you can have it replaced immediately.
- Travelling overseas requires some extra planning. Arrange to take enough of your medication in its original packaging to last your holiday. If you are going for less than six months, you should take enough medication to last the whole time. Pharmacists are able to dispense the full amount of the script, including all the repeats at once if the script is endorsed by the doctor with the words "Regulation 24". You should ask your doctor for a letter listing your medications, including their generic [chemical] names, since brand names may vary between countries.
- If your seizures are not fully controlled and especially if you are travelling alone, it may be helpful to ask your doctor for a brief letter about your condition, in case you need to see a doctor while you are away. Always carry extra medication in your hand luggage in case your main luggage is lost or delayed.
- Find out if vaccinations are recommended for the country or countries you intend to visit. Most vaccines are safe for people with epilepsy with the exception of malaria. Your doctor will be able to discuss your options with you.
- Long distance travel can disrupt your sleep pattern and your medication routine you should talk to your neurologist or doctor about times to take your medications.
- Avoid excessive alcohol during the flight.
- It is highly recommended that you take out travel insurance for the duration of your trip. As epilepsy is considered a pre-existing condition, a higher premium will be charged but you will know that you are covered in the event of an emergency. Medical costs incurred outside Australia have the potential to cause financial ruin.

Sport & Leisure

When people are busy and active they are less likely to have seizures. When choosing a sport or leisure activity give some consideration to your type of epilepsy and your degree of seizure control. Some activities involve a greater risk than others but with appropriate safety precautions most risks can be minimised.

Cycling

When cycling take normal safety precautions such as wearing a helmet, wearing easily visible clothing and using lights at night. Use designated bike paths to avoid the traffic. If your seizures are not well controlled stick to bike paths and parks rather than cycling on public roads.

Horse Riding

Wear a riding helmet and try to ride with other people.

High risk activities

Scuba diving and boxing are considered to be high-risk activities and should only be considered if your seizures are very well controlled. Activities such as bungy jumping are best avoided. There are a number of other sports that are particularly dangerous if you have frequent or unpredictable seizures and should be avoided such as downhill skiing, paragliding, and hang-gliding.

There may be other sports which interest you that are not mentioned in this leaflet. Discuss possible safety risks with your doctor.

Swimming and other water sports

Try to always swim with someone else, making sure that your companions know you have epilepsy and how to help if you have a seizure. If you are at a public swimming pool, tell the attendant how to assist you should the need arise.

When engaging in any water sport such as boating, canoeing, windsurfing or sailing always wear a life-jacket.

Underwater swimming such as scuba diving is not recommended. Having a tonic-clonic seizure whilst scuba diving could be fatal. If you are taking antiepileptic medication you are said to be more likely to experience 'nitrogen narcosis' than other divers, even at shallow depths which can put you at considerable risk when in the water.

Climbing and hiking

Any sport that involves being at a height is particularly dangerous for someone who has uncontrolled seizures.

Climbing should therefore be avoided by someone who is continuing to have seizures. Activities such as hiking and walking are acceptable as long as sensible precautions are taken.

Team and contact sports

Your epilepsy should not stop you from playing team and contact sports unless the epilepsy was caused by a serious head injury. Some people choose to wear head protection while playing regardless of whether or not they have epilepsy. It is always a good idea to wear protective headgear in contact sports regardless of your health status.