

## BEING PREGNANT WITH EPILEPSY!

### ***Do I have to keep taking my medication while I'm pregnant?***

Yes. The dangers of not taking your medication and increasing your risk of having a seizure is considered greater than the risks associated with taking antiepileptic medication. It is understandable that taking medication throughout your pregnancy may cause concern, however if the pregnancy is planned in consultation with your neurologist all factors will be taken into account to ensure the best possible outcome for you and your future child.

### ***Can specific medications for epilepsy affect my baby?***

While the risk of something being wrong with your baby is slightly higher than for women who don't have epilepsy, 95% of women with epilepsy have healthy babies.

It must be stressed that this figure includes minor problems such as change in shape of earlobes or shorter toes. The risk of more serious abnormalities like spina bifida, congenital heart disease, cleft palate, or harelip, occurring is very small. Folic acid supplements will reduce the risk of neural tube defects that cause spina bifida. In general, fear of malformations has been exaggerated.

In most cases taking antiepileptic medication during pregnancy appears to have no lasting effect on the growth or intellectual development of the child. The safest course for women needing antiepileptic drug treatment during pregnancy appears to be to take a single drug at the lowest possible dose to prevent seizures from occurring. There is some evidence that sodium valproate may adversely affect intellectual development. Pregnancies can be well monitored these days to detect the presence of any abnormality by blood tests and scanning.

A maternal serum blood test is now available for pregnant mothers to find out if they may be at increased risk of having a baby with neural tube defects. This test will help identify four out of five with neural tube defects.

Ask your doctor about Vitamin K towards the end of your pregnancy as some antiepileptic medications can affect the metabolism of Vitamin K in the newborn that may lead to bleeding.

### ***What happens to the frequency of my seizures during pregnancy?***

It's not possible to predict what will happen to your seizure pattern. For some, seizure control remains unchanged during pregnancy. There will be women who will experience fewer seizures, while others may find their seizures more difficult to control. It is important to advise your doctor of any seizures during pregnancy. Status epilepticus and prolonged seizures in pregnancy are considered a medical emergency.

During your pregnancy it is advisable to:

- get enough rest and sleep [lack of sleep can trigger seizures]
- continue to take medication as prescribed.
- look after you, find time to pamper yourself. This is sometimes hard for a busy person.
- maintain a healthy diet
- exercise sensibly and regularly
- abstaining from alcohol and tobacco will assist in minimising risks
- avoid stressful situations

### ***Do I have choices for my labour and delivery?***

It is recommended that you have your baby in hospital. Home births are not an option. You will still have the same choices for labour and delivery as any other woman.

## **Pregnancy Register**

For women with epilepsy the absolute risk of birth abnormalities is 4 – 6%, double the risk of 2 – 3% that exists in the general population. Is this increased risk caused by the effects of their seizures; the drugs or combinations of drugs they have to take; their genetic background or environmental factors?

In May 2000 a group of researchers launched a national register for pregnant women with epilepsy. This register will allow them to follow, in large numbers, women throughout their pregnancy and help determine the real factors for this increased risk in birth abnormalities.

If you wish to take part in this, please phone 1800 069 722

## Becoming a mother

Motherhood is a big step for any woman. If you have fears about becoming a parent you should discuss your feelings frankly and honestly with your partner, family and doctor. Parenting may be more difficult if your seizures are less well controlled. This will depend on the type of seizures you experience and how frequently they occur.

### ***Can I breastfeed if I am on antiepileptic drugs?***

All antiepileptic medications are excreted in breast milk but only in low concentrations and much less than the baby would have been exposed to during pregnancy. Breastfeeding therefore should not be a problem. If your baby continually appears drowsy seek specialist advice. Breastfeeding can be a tiring process and lack of sleep may trigger seizures in some mothers.

### ***What can I do to ensure my baby's safety in case I have a seizure?***

- Make sure you get enough sleep, try to have naps during the day as lack of sleep can trigger seizures.
- To avoid interruptions turn the phone volume down, put a note on the front door, turn on the answering machine.
- Your partner may be able to help with feeding, bathing and changing nappies or you could do them together.
- When feeding the baby, sit on the floor with your back to the wall and a cushion on either side to give yourself adequate support.
- It's safer and easier to change nappies on the floor rather than on a table.
- If you are having frequent seizures avoid carrying the baby in your arms.
- If you are alone sponge rather than bathe the baby.
- Always use a safety harness when the baby is in a pram or stroller. If you are out consider tying a length of cord from your wrist or waist so that the pram will not run away if you have a seizure.
- Should you have a seizure the usual fireguards, playpens and stair gates will protect the child from dangers in the home.
- Consider attaching toddler reins to your wrist until your child understands the importance of staying near you should a seizure occur when you are out. Small children should carry identification just in case they do wander away.
- Be sure your garden is well fenced and ensure that swimming pools have a childproof gate.
- Children love to mimic adults. Store medications in childproof containers safely out of reach at all times.
- Employ all the usual child safety precautions which any parent with a child should adopt.
- Don't feel guilty about asking for and accepting help. Your needs are important at this time.

### ***How will I explain my epilepsy to my child?***

As your child gets older it is important to discuss your seizures and your medications. Story books and videos are available from your Epilepsy Association that may help you explain your epilepsy to your children. Ensure that your children are clear about what to do if a seizure occurs.

It can be a very distressing experience for young children to make sense of their mother's seizures. It can be a temporary role reversal where the mother is helpless and the child becomes the 'carer'. It may be helpful to put positive coping strategies in place. Give the child a simple task to do like getting a cloth to place under your face to protect from abrasions and absorb saliva, or stroking your face to offer words of comfort. Above all, always answer their questions in a positive and simple manner when they arise.