

# 7a Epilepsy: Safety in the Home

Safety in the home is a major consideration for everyone but additional safeguards may be needed for people with active epilepsy, particularly those with unpredictable seizures.

## LIVING AREAS:

### Floors and Upholstery

Avoiding coarse fabrics may reduce the risk of friction burns. Use non-slip, cushioned floor coverings or carpets and avoid hard flooring such as ceramic tiles. Ensure stair carpet is securely fitted.

### Doors and Windows, Stairs and Balconies

Check if toughened safety glass is fitted in windows and doors in older houses. If not, consider replacing existing glass or applying safety film. Consider whether balcony railings are high enough. Consider the use of safety gates to prevent accidents on stairs. Handrails or grab bars can be useful when balance is affected after seizures.

### Fires and Radiators

Avoid open coal and log fires wherever possible, and free standing heaters which can cause severe burns if you fall on them. Provide secure guards to all fires. Radiator guards are advisable, and hot pipes should be covered with insulating material.

### Furniture

Choose sturdy furniture with rounded corners or use corner protectors. Avoid overcrowding of furniture and beware of hazards such as glass-topped tables and breakable ornaments. Where glass in furniture cannot be avoided, ensure safety glass is fitted.

### Lighting

Ensure you have adequate lighting, especially at night if seizures cause you to get up and wander in confusion. The use of candles, even small decorative tea lights, should be avoided if seizures are a possibility. Low energy bulbs in lamps give out less heat than traditional light bulbs. Choose lamps which have a stable base and position them carefully.

## Alarms

These may be available through your local community alarm service, or may be purchased. There are several types available. They can be used within the home and can be linked by radio signal to an automatic dialler, triggering a telephone call to named individuals or to a monitoring service.

A **bed alarm** can detect convulsive seizures occurring during sleep. Some models also monitor the heart rate and breathing patterns.

A **pressure mat** alerts when a person lands on the mat, e.g. falling out of bed or wandering in a seizure.

An **exit sensor** is triggered when a door is opened.

An **enuresis sensor** detects when wetting occurs in bed during a seizure.

A **fall or tilt alarm** is worn like a pager and can help summon aid where consciousness is lost without warning.

A **pill dispenser alarm** can provide an audible and visual signal when medication is due. Device can be connected to remote dialler to alert others/monitoring service if medication is not taken.

A **mains-installed smoke sensor** monitored remotely may be advisable because during a seizure, the person will not be able to hear a smoke alarm.

A **natural gas sensor with automatic gas shut off valve** monitors gas build-up if cooker, gas fire or boiler is not properly lit. A build up of natural gas could cause an explosion.

A **carbon monoxide sensor** can be mains-installed to detect this odourless dangerous gas, which is lethal at low concentrations.

## Televisions

Less than 5% of people with epilepsy are photosensitive. Simple measures can reduce the risk of having a seizure while watching a traditional TV. Make sure the screen is at least 2.5 metres (8 feet) away and sit level with the screen rather than below it. Place a subdued light close to the TV to balance the brightness of the screen. A small TV screen (less than 14") may reduce risk. It is preferable to change channels with a remote control, but if you have to go near the TV while it's switched on, cover one eye to reduce the flicker effect. Avoid watching the screen during fast forward or rewind.

Of the newer format TVs—LCD (Liquid Crystal Display), plasma and HD (High Definition) - LCDs are considered to be the safest option for people with photosensitive epilepsy. A flat screen LCD TV with a 100Hertz screen is a good choice. Plasma screens and HD systems tend to be brighter and have sharper contrast.

See leaflet 7e 'Epilepsy: Leisure and Pleasure—Safety Issues' and leaflet 8 'Photosensitive Epilepsy'.

## Kitchen

In the kitchen -

- use a cooker with quickly controlled heat (gas or halogen)
- fit a cooker guard to the front of the hob
- use back rings/burners rather than those in front
- turn pot handles inwards to avoid accidentally knocking them over
- a pan insert allows potatoes and other veg to be lifted out of the pot when cooked, leaving the pan of hot water to cool down on the cooker
- grill rather than fry food (avoid eye level grills)
- using a microwave oven may be a safer option than using the cooker. Place in a safe position, e.g. on work surface
- a kettle tipper allows boiling water to be poured without having to lift the kettle
- chip pans and deep fat fryers should be avoided.

## Bedroom

If you have seizures which cause you to fall out of bed, sleep on a low bed or futon, or consider placing a fall-out mat alongside the bed.

If you have seizures when asleep, avoid using soft feather pillows which can cause suffocation. Special breathable pillows are available.

Bedside furniture should be a safe distance from the bed. Hot water bottles are best avoided as they can scald. A microwaveable wheat bag may be a safer option. Turn off your electric blanket before getting into bed. Please note that smoking in bed is extremely dangerous.

## BATHROOM

With wet/slippy floors, hard edges, deep water and soapy hands/eyes, bathrooms carry particular risks within the home. For people with epilepsy, a shower is generally safer than a bath, although neither option is risk-free. Take into consideration how epilepsy affects you—what kind of seizures you have, how frequent they are, whether you get a useful warning beforehand. Whether you decide on a shower or bath, the following suggestions will help minimise risk.

### Precautions to ensure quick access in case of emergency

- a sliding or folding door or one that opens outwards
- only take a bath or shower when there is someone else in the house
- use a vacant/engaged sign (or sign!) rather than locking the door.

### Showers

- install a walk-in shower with a non-slip floor or mat
- fit grab rails
- use a shower seat
- choose a thermostatically controlled shower rather than a mixer tap.

### Baths

- use a non-slip bathmat
- fit grab rails
- run the cold water first to ensure the water is not too hot

## **Baths (Cont)**

- keep water shallow
- cushion taps and hard edges with towels
- pull out the bathplug before starting to get out of the bath.

For specific advice about your own bathroom, speak to an occupational therapist or epilepsy fieldworker. Help with bathroom adaptations may be available from your local authority.

## **Electrical Appliances**

Kettles, irons, hair dryers and DIY tools can be dropped during a seizure causing serious burns, scalds, other injuries and fires. Use cordless equipment with automatic cut-outs. Consider fitting extra power sockets to avoid trailing extension cables and wires from multi-point plugs.

## **Computers**

For people with photosensitive epilepsy, there are various precautions you should take regarding computer screens, games and software. See leaflet 8 'Photosensitive Epilepsy'.

## **In the garden**

Grass, bark chippings and wooden decking may be a better choice than concrete or stone surfaces underfoot.

Avoid prickly shrubs and hedges and uncovered ponds. Safety grids for ponds must be load-bearing and properly secured. Use powered mowers and other tools with care—use a circuit breaker and avoid trailing flexes. Use equipment with automatic cut-outs. Be aware of the potential danger posed by barbecues and other sources of heat.

Consider a padlock for the gate to secure an enclosed garden where there is a risk of random automatic behaviour in a seizure. Consider replacing steps with ramps to lessen risk of injury.

## **SEIZURE MANAGEMENT**

### **Medication**

Keep securely stored out of reach of harm's way. If you find it difficult to keep track of taking your medication, consider using a drug wallet or dispensing box, available from Epilepsy Connections or your local pharmacy. Pill reminder alarms can be purchased from independent suppliers.

### **First Aid**

Keep a First Aid box handy, and explain to family and friends what they may need to do when you have a seizure. Please see Leaflet 4 'What to do when someone has a seizure'.

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Keep a list of emergency contacts handy, e.g. family, GP, carers, neighbours, with a description of your seizures and what should be done in an emergency.

**For more information about safety equipment and adaptations at home, contact Epilepsy Connections.**

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Supporting people with epilepsy

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