

7e Epilepsy: Leisure and Pleasure— Safety Issues

Most people enjoy an active social life and taking part in leisure activities can contribute to wellbeing. However, when socialising, exposure to stress, alcohol, recreational drugs, excessive noise, heat and dehydration can pose problems for anyone, particularly people with epilepsy. This leaflet aims to support people with epilepsy to make informed choices about leisure activities by identifying areas of risk.

ACTIVITIES

Cinema and Theatre

Going to the cinema and the theatre is safe for most people with epilepsy. Films and stage productions with special effects (including laser, strobe effect and flashing lights) could potentially trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy. If your seizures are unpredictable or severe you may wish to think carefully about where to sit. Consider choosing seats in the lower levels, avoid stone steps etc and consider the need for access and assistance should a seizure occur.

Pubbing, Clubbing and Gigs

Lights flashing at a rate of 3-60 Hertz (flashes per second) can be uncomfortable and may trigger seizures in people with photosensitive epilepsy.

If you are affected, turn away and cover one eye with your hand until the lights stop flashing. Be aware of other seizure triggers to which you may be exposed including dehydration, excess noise and heat, late nights, alcohol and recreational drugs.

Theme Parks, Fairgrounds, Carnival Rides

Be aware that fast moving, jerking or spinning rides may disorient you.

ALCOHOL, STIMULANTS and RECREATIONAL DRUGS

The following does not describe all stimulants/recreational drugs but is limited to those known to have possible adverse effects on people with epilepsy. Other drugs and substances not listed here may also have adverse effects on epilepsy and seizures, e.g. some food additives.

Alcohol

The effect of alcohol on the brain and possible interactions with AEDs can make seizures more likely. Some people find that even moderate use of alcohol can make their seizures worse. Excess alcohol and binge drinking can cause seizures and are associated with common seizure triggers such as late nights, disturbed sleep, missed meals and missed doses of AEDs. However, many people taking AEDs enjoy alcohol on moderation, i.e. up to 1-2 units per day without any problems.

Alcohol (Cont)

For more information see leaflet 7e 'Epilepsy: Leisure and Pleasure—Safety Issues'

It's important for individuals to take into account their epilepsy and their general health and find a safe limit of alcohol consumption.

Current recommended guidelines for maximum alcohol intake are:-

MEN: up to 3 units per day **WOMEN:** up to 2 units per day

1 unit of alcohol =

1/2 pint of ordinary strength beer, lager or cider

or

1 small glass (125ml) of wine

or

1 single pub measure of spirits (1/6th of a gill or 25ml)

Stimulants

Caffeine

In its pure form caffeine can reduce the seizure threshold but there is no evidence to suggest that drinking reasonable amounts of tea or coffee can trigger seizures. However some people report improved seizure control when they reduce their caffeine consumption.

Drinking too much of **any** fluid may cause water retention which in turn can upset the fluid balance of the body (water intoxication) and may trigger seizures.

Tobacco

There is no evidence to link smoking with seizures. If you want to stop smoking seek advice from your doctor or community pharmacist before buying any nicotine products. Some nicotine preparations, notably Champix and Zyban, are not suitable for people with epilepsy as they may interact with antiepileptic drugs and cause seizures.

Solvents (glue, paint, aerosols, petrol)

Long term misuse of solvents can cause brain damage which can lead to epilepsy. Prolonged continuous use can make seizures worse.

Recreational Drugs

Amphetamines (speed, uppers) can cause seizures when taken in high doses and/or along with other substances. Amphetamines are used as a stimulant to stay awake and active for long periods. Resulting lack of sleep can trigger seizures in some people.

Barbiturates and Tranquilisers

High doses of barbiturates or tranquilisers can cause convulsions.

Cocaine (coke, crack) can trigger seizures in anyone, whether they have epilepsy or not, by reducing the seizure threshold.

Ecstasy (Es) tablets can be made up of many different substances so it is difficult to know if a person with epilepsy could experience a seizure due to the contents and purity of a tablet itself. There is evidence linking ecstasy with seizures, perhaps as a result of taking it with other illicit substances or by becoming dehydrated. Drinking too much water too quickly causes “water intoxication” which can trigger seizures.

Heroin (smack, scag, brown) has been linked with seizures, which can be caused by the drug itself, or by infection as a result of using dirty needles. Using heroin in combination with alcohol or other illicit substances may also provoke seizures.

Marijuana (cannabis, grass, pot, hash) affects people differently and there is little scientific evidence to suggest that it has any effect on seizures. It is difficult to reach any definite conclusions because varying strengths and purities are available and people use different amounts. However, some people report improved seizure control, while others have more seizures.

Seizures are caused by an imbalance in the chemical activity of the brain. AEDs work to restore that balance. Recreational drugs also affect the brain’s chemical balance. Mixing AEDs with illicit substances can have an unpredictable effect on brain activity and is potentially very dangerous.

Use of any of the drugs previously mentioned can lead to lifestyle changes that may trigger seizures, e.g. missed meals, lack of sleep, forgetting to take medication.

Use of recreational drugs can have serious long-term, health and social implications.

For more information about alcohol, recreational drugs and solvents see www.trashed.co.uk or call the National Drugs Helpline on 0800 77 66.00 or contact Epilepsy Connections.

ELECTRONIC EQUIPMENT

TV, Video Games, Computers and Mobile Phones

About 5% of people with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy which means that their seizures can be triggered by flickering lights or patterns. If you have photosensitive epilepsy you can take precautions to reduce the risk of having a seizure while watching TV or playing video games. The guidelines below are

TV, Video Games, Computers and Mobile Phones (Cont)

particularly important in relation to children who should be supervised while watching TV, playing video games, using computers.

Watching TV

- make sure the room is well-lit
- place a small subdued light on top of or behind the TV to balance the brightness of the screen
- 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 100 Hertz screen is a good choice. Plasma screens and HD systems tend to be brighter and have sharper contrast
- sit well away from the screen (about 8 feet or 2.5 metres), level with the screen rather than below it
- change channels with a remote control or cover one eye to reduce flicker if you have to approach the TV while it's switched on
- take a 5 minute break away from the screen every 30 minutes.

Playing video games on a TV screen

- follow the above guidelines for watching TV
- read and follow the instructions that accompany the game
- don't play when tired
- UK providers of TV programmes, games and software are required to avoid including flashes and patterns that may trigger photosensitive seizures. Some, but not all, TV programmes, videos, DVDs, games and software have photosensitive warnings—check before viewing
- take a 5 minute break away from the screen every 15 minutes
- switch the game off immediately if you feel uncomfortable in any way—dizzy, blurred vision, muscles start to twitch.

Using computers

- Computer screens are generally safe for people with epilepsy, but may be a factor in triggering seizures for people with photosensitive epilepsy.
- Liquid crystal screens (used in laptop computers) don't flicker and shouldn't present any problems.
- The risk of a seizure occurring while using a computer screen depends on the material being viewed. Some software, especially games and cartoons can contain flickering images or patterns that may trigger seizures. Software that includes images of significant intensity and frequency may trigger a seizure.
- Reading from the screen for a long time can cause tiredness and this could cause seizures in some people. Use an anti-glare screen to reduce fatigue and discomfort and take frequent regular breaks away from the screen—use a timer as it's easy to lose track of time.
- Move away from the screen for 5 minutes every 15 minutes.

For more information regarding photosensitivity see Leaflet 8.

Mobile Phones

Research into the effects on health of using mobile phones is inconclusive. So, until there is more evidence it is sensible for everyone, including children, whether they have epilepsy or not, to restrict their mobile phone use to short, essential calls only.

Mobile phones should be kept away from vagus nerve stimulation devices.

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Supporting people with epilepsy

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