

Epilepsy—Safety in sport

The majority of people with epilepsy have their seizures controlled with medication and lead a full and active life. The aim of this leaflet is to identify and minimise risk to enable you to do that.

Safety is a major consideration for everyone but additional safeguards may be needed for people with uncontrollable epilepsy.

With the right support and safety precautions, most sports are accessible to people with epilepsy.

If you haven't exercised for a while speak to your GP before taking up sport and don't overdo it. Everyone needs to pace themselves and build up slowly to a level of fitness.

Choices about taking part in a particular sport or activity should be made with safety precautions tailored to meet individual needs thereby avoiding any unnecessary restrictions.

Base your decisions on:

- the risks the sport poses
- the type of seizures you have and how well controlled they are
- your seizure triggers
- whether you get a useful warning before seizures
- whether you have any side effects of antiepileptic drugs (AEDs)
- the risks to you and others if a seizure occurs while participating.

Bear in mind:

- It's important for your own and others' safety to tell the instructor, supervisor or referee that you have epilepsy. It would be useful to carry an epilepsy ID card or wear an ID bracelet, if appropriate.
- If possible, take a companion with you who knows what your seizures are like and how to manage them. This is particularly important if you want to take part in water sports.
- For some sports it is advisable to have appropriate insurance. Governing bodies will be able to advise on this.

Boxing

If you have epilepsy, have a history of epilepsy or take antiepileptic medication you will not be allowed to take part in boxing in the UK.

Bungee Jumping

Sudden changes in pressure occur when bungee jumping, which may affect the brain and may trigger a seizure.

Canoeing, Kayaking, White Water Rafting

Gently flowing water poses fewer risks than fast flowing rivers with rapids and waterfalls. An open canoe is easier to get out of, and therefore may be safer than a kayak. It is advisable to wear protective headgear and always have a competent companion with you.

Climbing

It may be possible to try climbing on an indoor wall under the supervision of a qualified instructor who knows how to manage seizures.

If your seizures are well-controlled and you are intending to climb out of doors, all safety precautions must be observed and you should only climb with companions who are aware of your epilepsy and know how to manage seizures.

Reduced oxygen levels at high altitude may trigger seizures.

Cycling

Cycling in traffic can be dangerous for anyone. Everyone should:

- wear a helmet
- wear reflective clothing
- ensure brakes, lights and bells are working
- stick to side roads and bike lanes as much as possible.

See 'Rules for Cyclists' and 'You and Your Bicycle' at www.gov.uk

A tandem, trike or adapted bike may be an option for adults and children with very severe/frequent seizures.

Fishing

Never go fishing by yourself - always take a companion and wear a life jacket. It is safer to fish from the water's edge than from a boat or a pier.

Golf

Always take a companion and carry a mobile phone.

Gymnastics, Trampolining, at the Gym

Let the instructor know that you have epilepsy and discuss what to do in the event of a seizure. Ensure there is supervision when using any equipment.

Hang-gliding, Paragliding, Skydiving and Parachuting

Flyability can offer individual risk assessments and have provided tandem flights to people with epilepsy.

Contact Flyability by E-mail: Contact@Flyability.org.uk or visit their website at www.flyability.org.uk

Martial Arts

Contact the relevant governing body for information on participation.

Racquet Sports

Some racquet sports are strenuous so beware of overheating and dehydration, which may trigger seizures.

Rambling and Hiking

It's safer to go with a group and with someone who knows how to manage seizures. Follow standard safety guidelines:

- tell someone where you are going, when you expect to get there and give them details of your route
- take a mobile phone but be aware that you may be out of range of the phone network
- have a plan in place for getting help in an emergency.

The Ramblers can provide more information about safety issues. Tel: 01577 861222 or visit their website at www.ramblers.org.uk/scotland

Riding

Everyone should wear a helmet when horse riding. It's best to stay away from heavy traffic and always have a companion with you. Visit Riding for the Disabled's website at www.rda.org.uk to obtain further information and local contact details.

Running

Running/jogging should be built up gradually and be aware of the need to warm up and cool down appropriately. Take plenty of fluids to avoid dehydration. If possible, have someone with you who can manage your seizures.

Sailing, Surfing, Wake Boarding, Windsurfing, Water Skiing

Contact the relevant governing body for a detailed risk assessment.

Always take a companion, wear a buoyancy aid and ensure there is appropriate expert supervision.

Scuba Diving and Snorkelling

Sub-Aqua is a sport that can be physically demanding and requires general physical fitness and good health. All prospective divers are required to complete the UK Sport Diving medical prior to commencing aqualung training. Various conditions, including epilepsy, could possibly prohibit you entering dive training and anyone with a history of epilepsy must seek medical advice before participating.

Bear in mind that:

- a seizure can lead to drowning and poses a risk to others
- managing a seizure and getting emergency help is likely to be difficult at sea
- people taking AEDs may be more susceptible to the effect of nitrogen narcosis, leading to disorientation at unexpectedly shallow depths
- raised oxygen pressure in compressed air may trigger seizures.

Scuba Diving and Snorkelling (cont)

The Scottish Sub-Aqua Club (0131 625 4404) can offer advice to individuals or visit their website at www.scotsac.com

Skateboarding and Rollerblading

Learn on a smooth, flat surface. Ensure that equipment is well maintained and that you know how to use it correctly. Stay away from traffic and wear appropriate protective headgear and clothing. Avoid high ramps in skateboard parks.

Skiing and Snow Boarding

Downhill skiing/snow boarding poses additional risks to people with epilepsy. Cross-country skiing with a companion may be a safer option.

Swimming

Supervision is essential but should be as discreet as possible. It's particularly important that people with epilepsy are included in swimming lessons.

- Learn to swim in a safe environment.
- Take a companion with you who knows what to do if a seizure occurs in water – practice rescue procedures with your companion to build your confidence and theirs (see the guidelines 'What to do if someone has a seizure in the water' which follow).
- Tell the lifeguard that you have epilepsy and ensure he/she knows what to do if you have a seizure.
- If there is no qualified life-saver present, don't swim any deeper than your companion's shoulder height and stay within arm's reach.
- Don't take unnecessary risks:
 - ◇ Never swim alone.
 - ◇ Be careful about swimming in the sea, lakes or in very cold water.
 - ◇ Avoid overcrowded places where it would be difficult for you to be seen.
 - ◇ Don't swim if you're feeling unwell.

What to do if someone has a seizure in the water.

Never put yourself at risk.

- Support the person from behind and ensure their head is above the water.
- If possible, move the person to shallow water.
- Don't try to restrict movements or place anything in the person's mouth.
- Once uncontrolled movements have stopped, move the person out of the water and place them on their side.
- Take appropriate resuscitation measures and get medical help immediately in case water has been inhaled.

Team Sports

You can take part in sports such as rugby, football and hockey with safety measures in place, i.e. wearing head protection. However, it may be best to avoid these sports if your epilepsy was caused by a head injury.

Yoga

Make sure your teacher knows you have epilepsy and how to manage seizures. Contact Yoga Scotland for details of qualified teachers in your area. Visit their website at www.yogascotland.org.uk

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Supporting people with epilepsy

Head Office

100 Wellington Street
Glasgow G2 6DH
tel: 0141.248.4125
fax: 0141.248.5887

Forth Valley Fieldwork Service

Administration Offices
Falkirk Community Hospital
Westburn Avenue
Falkirk FK1 5QE
tel: 01324 673750

Email: info@epilepsyconnections.org.uk
Website: www.epilepsyconnections.org.uk