

Epilepsy and Safety

Many people with epilepsy have concerns about safety.

This Factsheet sets out some precautions that you can take to minimise risks. These are general suggestions and will not be relevant or necessary for everybody with epilepsy.

Bathing

A shower is a safer option than a bath for people with epilepsy. Although neither is risk free, precautions can be taken to minimise risks. Showers should be in a free standing cubicle with a flat floor rather than a shower tray where water can be trapped. Taking a shower while sitting will reduce the risk of injury and a good temperature control system with a safety 'cut-off' point will avoid scalding. Bathroom fittings should protrude from the wall as little as possible. Where they do protrude, or where a shower is being used over a bath, the fittings can be lagged with protective material – even a towel can be effective. When a bath is used, the depth of the water should be kept to a few inches and the taps turned off before getting into the bath. You should let someone in the house know when you are having a bath or shower, not lock the bathroom door or have a lock that can be operated from the outside in an emergency. The door should be hinged outwards.

Cooking

Gas and electric cookers can be hazardous in the event of a seizure. A cooker guard and chip pan with automatic thermostat will help to minimise danger. Saucepan handles should be turned away from the edge of the cooker to avoid being knocked over. Taking plates and serving dishes to the cooker rather than carrying hot pans away from it reduces the risk of scalding. A microwave oven may be a safer alternative and a toaster avoids the possibility of a grill being left on. Kettle tippers and teapot pourers are available to avoid carrying containers of hot liquid about. Some safety aids can be bought from DIY stores and, though primarily intended for child safety, they can be useful to the whole family.

Electric Flexes

Avoid trailing flexes, particularly those attached to appliances which could cause a fire if knocked over.

Heating

Avoid free standing heaters which can be knocked over. Open fires should be protected with substantial fixed fire guards. Radiator guards are advisable as sharp edges can cause severe cuts.

Flooring

Avoid hard surfaces. Carpets with a high wool content are less likely to cause friction burns than those with a high synthetic content. Sealed cork, vinyl tiles, or vinyl cushion flooring can be used in wet areas like bathrooms and kitchens.

Stairs/Stair Lifts

Where possible, housing without stairs should be chosen. Where a vertical lift is used, it should have a padded interior as the confined space can be hazardous in the event of a seizure. Safety straps used in a stair lift should be simple lap straps as a full harness could cause injury during a seizure. Neither stair lifts nor vertical lifts are risk free for people with epilepsy and a compromise has to be reached between the person and what is practicable within the home.

Telephone

If you don't have a phone in the house and you feel that this could put you or a family member at risk, a grant towards the cost of connecting a telephone may be available.

(Contact Enlighten for details on how to apply).

Glass

Use safety glass or cover ordinary glass with cling film. Glass panels indoors can be replaced with perspex or wooden ones. Avoid having display cabinets with glass fronts.

Alarms

There are a number of different types available:

- Personal alarms to alert another person in close proximity.
- Telephone alarms which are operated by remote control.
- Fall alarms which are sensitive to a person falling.
- Bed alarms which pick up unusual sounds or movements during sleep.
- Baby intercom alarms to alert someone in another room to a sleep seizure.

In some instances however, alarms are not helpful. For example, there has to be somebody else around to hear a fall alarm and generally a person needs to have a warning of a seizure for a telephone alarm to be useful. Therefore, before investing in any of them, make sure your chosen alarm is likely to be effective for you.

Beds

For people who have seizures during sleep, a bed placed against a wall or with protective cushions around it can help minimise injury. Objects like bedside tables/cabinets with sharp edges should be kept away from the bed. Children with epilepsy should not use bunk-bed or cabin type beds.

Pillows

Soft pillows can be dangerous if seizures occur at night. You may choose to sleep without one or to use an anti-suffocation pillow.

Television

For those with photosensitive epilepsy, the television is best placed at eye level, at least 3m away from the viewer, with a small illuminated lamp on top.

Gardens

If you are a parent with epilepsy, you must ensure that children cannot wander off unsupervised should a seizure occur – garden gates need effective locks.

Carrying Identification

Pendants, bracelets etc., can be ordered commercially and cards can be issued free by Enlighten to identify someone with epilepsy.

First Aid

A First Aid Kit and First Aid Manual should be kept in the house and medication should be kept in a safe place away from children.

Keep Safety in Perspective

Relatives of people with epilepsy should remember that overprotection can undermine self confidence.

As each person is affected differently by epilepsy, safety measures should be relevant and tailored to individual needs. People who only have sleep seizures for example, may not need to take any special precautions, whilst people with frequent seizures without warning will need to take extra care. In some cases, it may be appropriate to seek a community care assessment. A social worker or occupational therapist will draw up a plan of adequate safety aids and adaptations. Recommendations may also be made for support such as meals-on-wheels, home help, respite care or visiting support. To help you build a clear picture of your individual needs, you should consult your GP, a specialist or Enlighten. A list of the types of support available can be obtained from your local social work centre.

For further information, please contact:

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