

Epilepsy and Leisure

How people spend their leisure time affects their physical and mental well-being. The severity and degree of control of the epilepsy will for the most part dictate what a person can and cannot do, but, with proper supervision and safety precautions, there is little that a person with epilepsy need avoid.

Realistic Choices

Choices should be realistic, not restrictive, and will depend on individual circumstances. Those whose epilepsy is totally controlled by anti-epileptic medication will not need to take the same precautions as those who still experience seizures. School children with epilepsy should be included in activities unless their seizures prevent this. If their seizures are uncontrolled, informed decisions will need to be made for each individual situation. Where possible, the child should be involved in making the decision.

Which Activities Might Need Special Consideration?

Some simple safety measures will help minimise any potential risk to people with uncontrolled epilepsy.

Swimming

It is advisable to swim with someone who can manage a seizure. The lifeguard at a swimming pool should always be informed about the possibility of seizures – especially if you are swimming alone.

Water Sports

Sailing, canoeing and wind surfing need not be ruled out provided there is somebody available to manage a seizure. Life-jackets are essential at all times. Other water sports (e.g. sub-aqua diving, springboard diving, water-skiing) involve much greater risks and are not advised.

Fishing

Never fish alone and make sure your companion can manage a seizure. A life-jacket or light flotation device is advisable.

Climbing

Heights are a potential danger to anyone with epilepsy. However, this does not mean that every person with epilepsy need avoid this activity. The individual must take a serious look at the risks involved to both him/herself and other members of the party. If there is a significant increase in danger, this activity is best avoided.

Cycling

If seizures are uncontrolled, cycle with a friend and always aim to avoid heavy traffic. Cycling helmets should be worn by all cyclists.

Horse Riding

As with cycling, hard hats should be worn by anyone when riding and, similarly, it is advisable for people with uncontrolled epilepsy to ride with somebody who knows what to do in the event of a seizure.

Should a person with epilepsy also be physically disabled, the organisation 'Riding for the Disabled' has local groups all around the country offering special facilities.

Television and computer games

About 3% of people with epilepsy are photosensitive and they may experience difficulties with electronic screens. When watching TV, frequent breaks away from the screen are recommended, and sets with remote control are preferable to avoid having to approach too closely. If you must approach the set, cover one eye with your hand. Some video games feature patterns of flashing lights (strobe lighting) and can cause isolated seizures in a very small number of people, but they will be labelled as being unsuitable. The current medical opinion is that video games do not create a tendency to epileptic seizures when the tendency does not already exist.

Visual display units used with computers do not seem to promote the same reaction as televisions and most people with epilepsy can use a computer quite safely.

Discos

Strobe lighting that operates between 15-25 flashes per second may affect some people but this reaction often settles once seizures are treated.

Social drinking

Over-indulgence can cause seizures, so heavy drinking is best avoided, especially as taking drugs that act on the brain will make you much more sensitive to alcohol. Approximately 2 units of alcohol per day is regarded as 'safe'. Large amounts of any liquid, even water, can trigger a seizure in a person with epilepsy.

However, some people who take anti-epileptic medication still choose to drink alcohol and learn to judge their own safe level of alcohol consumption. Moderation is vital. If you hold a driving licence, do not drink and drive.

Relaxation

Everyone finds their own ways to relax. Any type of relaxation will help to prevent seizures which are triggered by stress.

Travel

It is vital to take sufficient medication to cover overseas travel as it could be difficult to obtain abroad and can vary slightly as regards brand names & formulation. Carry written information about your particular type of epilepsy and the drugs you take. An E111 Form can be obtained from most post offices and should be completed before travelling so that any medical expenses incurred in EC countries can be reclaimed. When taking out travel insurance, it is advisable to make it clear that you have epilepsy.

If you are flying to your destination, your doctor may prescribe a short course of Clonazepam to assist in preventing the onset of a seizure on the aeroplane.

The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) produce 2 publications:

- Holidays and Travel Abroad
- Holidays in the British Isles

which provide information on holidays for people with epilepsy and other disabilities.

Physically Disabled and Able Bodied (PHAB) runs over 250 clubs, holidays and schemes around the UK which bring physically disabled and able bodied people together.

BREAK also offers a range of holidays.

Contact Sports

There is evidence that individuals with epilepsy will not be adversely affected by contact sports (e.g. rugby, football, hockey), as long as the normal safeguards are followed. This includes adequate head protection. However, if a person's epilepsy was caused by head injury, their consultant may advise them to avoid such sports.

Activities to be avoided include parachuting, para-gliding, hang-gliding, trampolining and boxing. In the case of frequent seizures, this list may need to be expanded.

Further Reading and Useful Contacts

BREAK Holiday Club for Disabled People Tel: (01263) 823170/822161

British Sports Association for the Disabled Tel: (0171) 490 4919

GLAD: Greater London Association for the Disabled, '*London Disability Guide*' Tel: (0171) 274 0107

Jubilee Sailing Trust Tel: (0171) 631 388

Physically Disabled and Able Bodied (PHAB), 12-14 London Road, Croydon CR0 2TA Tel: (0181) 6681 6612

Shape Ticket Scheme, Cheap tickets to theatres, galleries, shows, cinemas etc Tel: (0171) 700 0100/8138

Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR), 25 Mortimer Street, London W1N 8AB
Tel: (0171) 250 3222

Riding for the Disabled Tel: (01203) 696510

Child Accident Prevention Trust Tel: (0171) 608 3828

The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents Tel: (0121) 200 2461

For further information, please contact:

Enlighten – Tackling Epilepsy, 5 Coates Place, Edinburgh EH3 7AA

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