

Epilepsy and Alcohol

There are 3 reasons why people with epilepsy should take more care if drinking alcohol:

- Alcohol can interfere with anti-epileptic medication by preventing it from reaching the level required in the blood stream to control seizures.
- Large amounts of any liquid, even water, can trigger a seizure in a person with epilepsy. An all night binge of alcohol can cause a seizure even in people who do not have epilepsy.
- Heavy drinking is often associated with late nights, missed meals and forgotten tablets – all likely to increase the risk of a seizure.

Some doctors recommend that alcohol should be avoided at all times by people with epilepsy. Others say that in most cases, a moderate amount of alcohol will do no harm.

This is an individual decision, to be taken in the light of professional advice and in the knowledge that taking drugs that act on the brain will make you much more sensitive to alcohol. Many people with epilepsy prefer not to drink alcohol at all, while some people learn to judge their own safe level of alcohol consumption.

Abuse of Alcohol: After Diagnosis

A diagnosis of epilepsy is difficult to accept and some people try to 'escape' from it by indulging in excess alcohol. Others may try to 'prove' they don't in fact have epilepsy by drinking a great deal.

'Surely if they can drink and not have a seizure, then they don't actually have epilepsy?'

Both routes are risky. In some cases, it can lead to alcohol problems developing after the onset of epilepsy. Alcohol does not help people 'escape' the difficulties experienced with personal relationships, employment, etc., after being diagnosed. If taken to excess, alcohol only makes these difficulties worse.

Abuse of Alcohol: As a Cause of Epilepsy

Excessive drinking over a long period can result in temporary or permanent brain damage. It also increases susceptibility to many other conditions, including epilepsy. Of those aged 25 years or over who have alcohol related problems, 20% of the men and 10% of the women experience epileptic seizures. In most cases, the seizures result from the withdrawal of alcohol after an intense bout of drinking. Hospital tests usually show no sign of abnormal brain activity and the seizures are unlikely to recur if the person gives up drinking completely.

In some cases, established epilepsy develops as a result of brain damage caused either by the direct effect of alcohol on the brain, or head injuries sustained while drunk. In such cases, hospital tests usually reveal abnormal brain activity which often remains even if alcohol is no longer consumed.

Some people experience epileptic seizures which are unconnected with their drinking problem. These are people who would have developed epilepsy anyway, regardless of the drinking.

Driving

Even small quantities of alcohol may impair driving ability in people without epilepsy and anti-epileptic drugs can increase sensitivity to alcohol. The person with epilepsy who is eligible to drive is best advised to avoid alcohol altogether if they have to drive in the next few hours.

Conclusion

Moderation is the key, along with a sensible eating and drinking pattern.

Short term abuse of alcohol can cause a seizure.

Remember that one seizure means losing your driving licence for at least one year.

Long term alcohol abuse can damage the brain. It is how you use alcohol that really counts and it is advisable to make a note of how alcohol affects you personally. If it has an adverse effect on you, then a discussion with

an appropriate person (e.g. your doctor, counsellor, or a close friend) might help you in coming to a decision on how best to deal with it.

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