



Seizure Triggers

Some people with epilepsy find that certain factors may trigger seizures. Seizure diaries can help to identify these triggers, and provide a good picture of seizure patterns.

A seizure diary needs to include:

- Date and time of seizures
- If you were asleep or awake
- Description or type of seizure
- What happened before, during and after the seizure, if known
- Medication taken and missed that day, including medication for other conditions
- Any possible seizure triggers
- General health and energy level leading up to the seizures
- Menstrual cycle for women

Some people may not become aware of their trigger until they keep a seizure diary for a period of time. The following list of trigger factors is a guide but it is by no means an exhaustive list.

Sleep

Epilepsy, along with other factors can affect sleep quality and that, in turn can affect seizure control. Sleep is important for everyone's health and well-being but particularly so if you have epilepsy. Being mindful of getting good quality sleep and practicing a good sleep hygiene is very important.

Alcohol

While some people with epilepsy have seizures that are very sensitive to even small amounts of alcohol, most are able to enjoy an occasional beer or two or a glass of wine with dinner.

The key is to ensure the principle of moderation. Moderate alcohol intake is having no more than 2 standard drinks in a day and preferably not every day.

A standard drink is equal to:

- One small glass of wine (100ml)
- One middy of full strength beer (285ml)
- One nip of spirits (30ml)

Alcohol and epilepsy medications interact in specific ways. Epilepsy medications can make a person more sensitive to the sedating effects of alcohol while alcohol reduces the effectiveness of the medication making seizures more likely. Excessive drinking can result in poor seizure control due to late nights, missed meals, or forgotten doses, while 'hangover' seizures are likely to occur as the alcohol level in the blood falls.

Ask the doctor about the effects of drinking alcohol with the type of epilepsy as well as how it might interact with medication.

Diet

Caffeine is a stimulant found in coffee, tea, chocolate, many soft drinks, high-energy drinks, some supplements and medications, including some diet pills, antihistamines and decongestants. Excessive amounts of caffeine can cause an increase in seizures in some people with epilepsy. In addition, caffeine may interfere with epilepsy medications, and can affect sleep patterns. Some people are susceptible to having seizures if they miss meals and have a low blood sugar level. Regular meals and eating immediately after getting out of bed in the morning may protect them against large swings in blood sugar levels.

Infections and illness

Some people say that they are more likely to have seizures when they have an illness, such as an infection that causes a high temperature. Children are particularly likely to have more seizures when they develop infections such as tonsillitis and earache. Allergies may provoke seizures in some people with epilepsy. Diarrhoea and vomiting can also trigger seizures as they can prevent the body from absorbing seizure medication.

Menstruation

Some women find that they have more seizures just before or during their menstrual period. This may be caused by a combination of factors such as increased fluid retention, alteration in hormonal levels and alteration in the blood levels of epilepsy medications. A significant increase in seizure activity at this time is known as catamenial epilepsy. If they notice this happening, it's good to discuss it with their doctor. By altering the dose of epilepsy medication or introducing another medication the doctor may be able to control or ease the problem.

Missed medication

Some people are particularly sensitive to increased seizures when they miss a dose of their epilepsy medication. The longer the break between doses, the lower your blood levels will go and the greater your chance of having a seizure. If medication is taken erratically or it's suddenly stopped, a person may trigger a severe and prolonged seizure or a cluster of seizures that will require hospitalization.

Other drugs

Withdrawal from sedative and hypnotic drugs including minor tranquillizers, sleeping pills and illegal drugs can be a problem as can combining these drugs with epilepsy medication. It is important to tell the doctor about all the medications taken. This also includes telling him or her about any over the counter herbal or vitamin supplements that are being taken.

Other possible triggers

Other possible triggers are unique to certain people. For example, some report that unusual stimuli known to trigger seizures can include the strong smells like petrol, bleach or the smell of glue.

Photosensitivity

Photosensitive epilepsy is rare, affecting only a small number of people with epilepsy. With photosensitive epilepsy, seizures are triggered by sensory stimuli such as flickering sunlight, strobe lights and flickering television. Simple preventative measures can be taken to decrease seizures triggered this way such as wearing wrap-around sunglasses to reduce glare and covering one eye to reduce the effects of flickering or flashing light. Most computer monitors do not present a problem, however if you are sensitive to screen flicker, try using a non-interlaced monitor and take regular breaks.

Changes in temperature

Some people are sensitive to the change of the temperature in the environment, such as very hot days and entering cold air-conditioning. Hot baths and showers, especially a sudden change in temperature can also be a trigger for seizures.

Stress

Stress can't always be avoided, but you can reduce its impact by changing the way you respond. It is important to identify the cause of stress and find practical solutions.

Some techniques for reducing stress might be:

- Muscle relaxation exercises
- Breathing techniques,
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Effective time management
- Music, reading
- Good support networks
- Exercise and sport

Although every effort has been made to ensure accurate and up to date information is provided, Epilepsy Queensland and its advisors cannot accept any liability in relation to the information provided. It is strongly recommended that you discuss any information with your doctor or other relevant organisations.

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