Epilepsy and Swimming

Most people living with epilepsy can and should take part in sports and other activities that are consistent with their age and offer a reasonable degree of safety. Sometimes the challenge can be identifying what an acceptable risk is. Some activities are obviously more hazardous than others, one of those being swimming.

It is important to assess each situation individually, taking into consideration the person’s epilepsy, their age, abilities, any other disabilities, the location in which they are going to be swimming, and if there are any other supports around that may be able to help supervise or provide assistance in the event of an emergency.

Supervision ensures people with epilepsy can participate safely.

EVEN if your epilepsy is well controlled, you should NEVER swim alone.

Ensure there is always a swimming companion who:
• is aware of your seizures and what they look like
• is able to maintain frequent eye contact
• stays close at all times
• is a strong swimmer
• knows what to do in the event of a seizure occurring in and out of the water

Some key points to consider before swimming:
• Always seek advice from your doctor before swimming.
• Inform the life guard (if available) of the potential risk of a seizure occurring
• A brightly covered swimming cap or swimming costume can help ensure quick and easy identification
• Avoid resting on the edge of a body of water

• If flickering or reflective light is a potential trigger for your seizures try wearing tinted goggles or sunglasses
• If you have had brain surgery check with your doctor before diving
• People with epilepsy should not swim or continue to swim if he/she is fatigued, feeling unwell, has missed medication or is experiencing warning signs that a seizure may occur
• People with epilepsy should avoid swimming under water for long periods of time as this can cause hyperventilation which has been identified as a trigger for seizures.

People with uncontrolled seizures should
• NEVER swim alone
• Consider wearing a safety vest that helps keep your head above water
• Have 2 people accompany you, one in the pool and one as a spotter outside the pool
• Have the pool companion maintain constant supervision, eye contact and stay within an arms reach of you at all times

Children with epilepsy participating in any form of swimming program both private and school based should also:
• Have a letter from your doctor approving them to participate in the swimming activity. Not sure this will always be possible for everyone?
• Provide the swimming instructor/support person with a current copy of an epilepsy management plan in the event of a seizure occurring

Swimming Coordinators must ensure:
• There is enough staff to include a 1:1 staff member to supervise the student at risk of having seizures in the water and...

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• A spotter out of the pool for those students with uncontrolled epilepsy that are in the water with a supervisor
• The supervisor of the student has read and understood the emergency management plan before taking the student swimming

The supervisor in the pool must ensure:
• They stay within arms length of the student at all times
• They go no deeper than the supervisors shoulder height for safety
• If the student is a strong swimmer and the seizures are well controlled the supervisor may actively watch the student from out of the pool provided they remain in close proximity. If in the surf it is advisable to enter the water with the student.

The spotter must ensure:
• They have read and understood the epilepsy management plan before taking the student swimming
• They actively supervise the student in the pool at all times
• They carry a whistle to alarm the supervisor and other staff in the pool that a student is having a seizure in the water
• They carry a mobile phone to call 000 in the event of an emergency
• If a seizure occurs the spotter blows the whistle, requests someone to call an ambulance using the mobile phone and wait for the ambulance out the front, retrieves the epilepsy management plan for that student and if necessary enters the pool to help assist the student and supervisor

If a seizure occurs in the water:
• Support the persons head so their face is out of the water
• Tilt their head back to ensure a clear airway
• Guide the student away from the edge of the pool to avoid injury
• Call out for assistance
• Do not place anything in the persons mouth or restrict their movements
• If in the pool (still water), remove the person from the water when the seizure stops. If the seizure is prolonged remove the person when help arrives and it is safe to do so
• If in the surf (moving water), remove the person from the water immediately

• Seek assistance if necessary and continue with the following first aid.

Out of the water:
• Place the person on their side to maintain an open airway
• Call an ambulance immediately even if the person is breathing as they may have inhaled water during the seizure.

When to call an ambulance
• If the seizure occurs in water
• If you have any doubt
• If a seizure lasts longer than 5 minutes
• If the seizures are clustering
• If they are injured
• If they are pregnant
• If they have diabetes
• If it is the first known seizure

An ambulance is called for all seizures occurring in the water. Even if the breathing seems to have returned to normal and the person appears to have recovered, water may have been inhaled into the lungs.

If a tonic clonic seizure occurs out of the water during swimming activities, the person should not continue swimming or water sports that day, even if they have fully recovered.

Some people experience seizures that are characterised by a strange sensation, but remain fully conscious. If this type of seizure occurs in the water, it does not require emergency action. However the person may feel tired afterwards, or have a headache, so they may need to get out of the water and rest for a while.

This is fact sheet has been compiled by the Services Team at Epilepsy Queensland Inc.

Although every effort has been made to ensure accurate and up to date information has been 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.