



Teenagers & epilepsy – general information

What is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a tendency to have recurring seizures due to a disorder of electrical activity somewhere in the brain. It is neither a psychiatric nor an intellectual disability and it is not infectious. There are many different seizure types and seizure syndromes. It is not just one condition; there are many forms of epilepsy.

Who gets epilepsy?

Anyone at any age, from any race, background or intelligence level can have epilepsy. It is most diagnosed in childhood, adolescence or in people over 60.

What causes epilepsy?

There are a number of causes of epilepsy, but sometimes there can be no cause at all. The most commonly identified causes include:

- Acquired brain injury
- Loss of oxygen
- Choking
- Strokes, tumors or cysts
- Genetics
- Infection

Seizure Triggers

Sometimes you may find that you have certain factors that can trigger a seizure. Listed below are common triggers to be aware of. However it is important to remember that some people may not have a trigger, or you may not even be aware of one without keeping a seizure diary.

Alcohol

Epilepsy shouldn't stop you from having an occasional beer or standard drink (as long as you're over 18!), however high quantities of alcohol can trigger a seizure.

Alcohol can also interact with your medication and increase its sedative effects. Late nights, dehydration

and hangovers can result in missed doses, missed meals and poor seizure control. It is important to plan your night and ensure you eat and drink plenty of water.

Diet

Drinks containing caffeine can trigger seizures in some people, while others can have seizures due to missed meals and low blood sugar levels. Regular meals and eating within similar time periods can help keep your blood sugar stable and therefore reduce the chance of a seizure occurring.

Lack of sleep

When you're a teenager it is often very tempting to stay up late talking to your friends and surfing the internet, however it is important to set yourself a routine. It is best to avoid extreme changes to sleeping habits. Instead of going to sleep straight after working on the computer, try reading a couple chapters of a book to allow your mind to wind down.

Stress

Stress is a normal part of life and is often helpful in motivating us; however extreme stress can lower your seizure threshold. It is important to learn to recognize when you are stressed and practice relaxation and coping techniques that you find effective. Some ideas that you may find helpful include -

- Taking time to do the activities you enjoy (e.g. reading, gaming, drawing)
- Yoga, massage, Pilates
- Sports and exercise
- Making a plan to complete your tasks
- Working through what is stressing you

How is epilepsy treated?

The first line of treatment for epilepsy is antiepileptic medications (AEDs). Medication will provide good seizure control for 60 – 70% of people whereas some



may continue to have seizures, but less frequently. When medications don't seem to have a significant effect there may be other options such as surgery, vagal nerve stimulation or special diets which can all improve seizure control in certain people.

The type of medication your doctor prescribes is based on multiple factors including the type of seizures you have, your age, and your preference (e.g. side effects).

As a teenager you are now able to begin to take more responsibility and control of your epilepsy. It is important to discuss any side effects of your medication with your doctor or epilepsy counsellor to determine ways to overcome them or discuss changes in treatment if the side effects are affecting your life.

How to safely take your medication

It is important to remember and time your medication doses accordingly (e.g. for when you wake up or go to bed). If you take your medication irregularly or stop taking it all together, this can result in breakthrough seizures, more seizures than normal or even extreme, longer-lasting seizures which can become a medical emergency. Missing doses and experiencing a seizure can also put you at risk of not being able to drive or can affect your progress at school.

Ways to ensure you take your medication regularly include -

- Scheduling an alarm on your phone, or marking on a calendar when you have taken it in case you forget
- Carry a dose of your medication with you in case you are not going to make it home in time for your next dose.
- Keep your medication in a spot where you are likely to see it during your morning and nightly routines (e.g. kitchen counter, nightstand, bathroom counter).

It is important to take note of any over the counter (OTC) medications you may take (e.g. for a headache or cold) as some of these can reduce the effect of your AEDs. It is a good idea to ask your pharmacy or doctor about any OTC medications, as well as herbal supplements.

One last thing to remember is to always take the same brand of your medication. At a pharmacy you may be asked whether you would like a 'generic' brand, however although the brand contains the same drug, the additives in the different brands can cause a change in seizure control. You have a right to voice your objection if you are given a generic brand without your permission.

Medication and side effects

The most common side effects of most AEDs include drowsiness, fatigue or sedation, dizziness, headaches,

changes in mood and troubles with memory. It is important to be aware of these side effects, as well as others that you may experience and talk with your doctor about these. Below are some management techniques for the most common side effects.

- Drowsiness, fatigue and sedation

Plan your day around your activities, allow for periods of rest and eat meals at the same time each day. Ensure you get enough rest and a quality amount of sleep each night

- Dizziness and headache

If you experience dizziness it often helps to sit down and close your eyes for a moment, blocking out everything going on around you. Take deep breaths and think about something that calms you (e.g. waves crashing, soothing music). These tips also help with headaches. OTC medications can also help if the headache is severe and beginning to affect your ability to concentrate or becoming too hard to tolerate. Ensure the OTC medication is safe to take with your AEDs and make sure you have permission from a parent.

- Memory, behavior and mood changes

A lot of AEDs can affect mood and behavior leading to depression, anxiety or even aggression. It is important to remember that these are common effects and there are solutions to overcome or manage these. Relaxation techniques can also help, as well as allowing yourself time to do activities. If you are having trouble with memory there are ways to overcome this;

- write lists for tasks, setting alarms, using a diary to write down when you have appointments or assignments due
- break activities into small steps and processes so you don't have to remember lots of things at once.

If any of these side effects begin to affect your schooling, talk to your teachers. They are there to help you and will be able to draw out a plan for you to follow if you feel like you are having trouble. They can also provide work for you to do at home if you are having trouble concentrating throughout the day.

Sources: S D Shorvon, Handbook of Epilepsy Treatment: Forms, Causes and Therapy in Children and Adults, 2nd edn, Blackwell, Carlton, 2005
Epilepsy Foundation. (2014). Stress and Epilepsy. Retrieved from <http://www.epilepsy.com/learn/triggers-seizures/stress-and-epilepsy>

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