

Driving is not just a convenience. This privilege may also represent freedom, independence and economic self-sufficiency. Are these benefits off-limits for people with epilepsy?



Many people with epilepsy are able to drive, but before you take the wheel, let's look at a few statistics. Between 5 and 10% of Americans crash a car each year. For people with epilepsy, the rate is about 30 to 50% higher. While that sounds alarming, a 50% risk increase is far below the higher crash risk for drinking drivers, young male drivers or elderly drivers.

Not every car crash involving a person with epilepsy is from a seizure. Sometimes, the crash results from normal causes. Other times, sleepiness and delayed reactions, which can stem from seizure medications, might lead to a crash as well.

Of course, if someone is having frequent seizures with loss of awareness, it's not wise for them to be driving. So how long should a person be seizure-free, known as the seizure-free interval, before seizures are sufficiently controlled for safe driving? Different states in the US have different answers to this question, varying from three months to two years. Others leave it to the discretion of your physician.



Most states do make exceptions for people with certain types of seizures, including seizures too minor to affect driving ability, seizures with a prolonged and consistent aura or warning sign, and seizures that occur only in an established pattern during sleep.

So how does the state find out if a person has seizures? Most patients and epilepsy doctors believe that reporting of seizures should be the responsibility of the individual who has them. However, six states in the US: California, Nevada, Oregon, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, currently mandate that physicians report loss of consciousness and seizure disorders. Unfortunately, required reporting can be harmful to the patient-physician relationship and it may encourage concealment of seizures. For this reason, attempts are underway to change these mandatory physician reporting requirements.



Commercial driving uses a stricter standard. In the US, these rules require federally certified drivers to be seizure-free for at least ten years and off seizure medications. Interestingly, some people such as cab drivers or Highway Patrol do not require a commercial license, but spent much of the day driving anyway. Some doctors, including me, believe that these people should be seizure-free for longer periods than the average driver.

In closing, if you experience seizures, here are some things to consider before you get behind the wheel. Do not drive until you and your medical team have determined that it is safe to do so, and notify your physician if your seizure condition has deteriorated. Be aware of your state and national laws about seizures and driving. And should you feel a seizure coming on while driving, it's best to stop in the road and remain in the car. Pull over only if you are sure you can make it safely.

If you or someone you know has seizures, remember to put safety first, both the public's and your own.