

If you have epilepsy, it's important that you be aware of a few simple ways to protect your safety.

People with epilepsy know that seizures can provoke injuries. While it's important to be smart, and use common sense to avoid potential injuries, the goal is to live life as fully as possible.



People with frequent seizures should exhibit special care in water, including bathtubs. It may be safest to shower using a hand shower while sitting on a stool. When swimming, people with epilepsy should always be accompanied by an informed companion.



Special caution is needed around cutting and chopping machinery or in other potentially dangerous situations such as heights.

People with seizures should also be careful about burns near the stove or fires. Cook on the back burner to reduce spill or burn risk, should a seizure occur.



In very rare instances, seizures can cause fatalities, either from injuries or from the poorly understood condition called SUDEP, an abbreviation for “sudden unexplained death in epilepsy.” Consult a medical team to discuss precautions to avoid this (some cases of SUDEP cannot be prevented).

Aside from the risk of injury from a seizure, be aware that all medications, including anti-epilepsy drugs, have potential risks. For example, over years certain seizure medications can weaken bones. Of course, the risks of medications must be balanced against the risk of seizures and the limits that they put on lifestyle.

In early 2008, the FDA reported four suicides in about 28,000 patients taking epilepsy medicines, versus none in patients taking a placebo or sugar pill. Other patients reported having suicidal thoughts. Although these results are significant, for most people this FDA warning is just something to know, not a reason to change medicines. However, if you have symptoms of depression or thoughts of suicide, discuss them with your doctor immediately.

Many epilepsy medications have interactions with other drugs, and can change the side effects of other medications. Some anti-epilepsy medications reduce the effectiveness of low dose birth control pills, by causing the liver to clear the hormones were quickly from a woman's body. Unexpected pregnancy can result.

If you are on antiepileptic medication and might get pregnant, talk to your medical team about taking folic acid to reduce the risk of birth defects.

Some groups are genetically inclined to certain side effects. For example, people of Asian descent may be predisposed to get a dangerous rash when starting carbamazepine.

People with epilepsy should discuss potential adverse reactions or drug interactions with their medical team.



Many parents who have a small child and epilepsy worry about dropping or otherwise harming the child during a seizure. This is a very rare occurrence, but some precautions can be taken. Carry the baby as little as possible or use a pouch. Change the child on a floor rather than a raised table. Also, don't leave the baby in water and get help to supervise the baby in dangerous situations.

With tonic-clonic seizures, ensure that they do not bang into objects or the ground during the episode. Turn the person on their side so that secretions are not inhaled. Contrary to common belief, do not put anything in the mouth since bites, broken teeth or inhalation of the object can result. If the seizure continues for more than five minutes, not counting wake-up time, or rapidly goes into another seizure, then call 911 immediately.

This advice may be helpful, but it does not replace individualized medical counsel, which you should obtain from your health care team.

Having epilepsy does impose some restrictions on certain recreational activities.

All too often, families or medical advisers of people with epilepsy place a heavy blanket of restrictions over all activities that may even remotely lead to an injury. While reasonable precautions, like not allowing someone with uncontrolled seizures to fly a plane, are sensible, excessive restrictions can take the fun out of life and further stigmatized a person with epilepsy.

So how do we decide which activities are reasonable and which are not worth the risk? There is no general answer to this question, however, four points should be considered.

The first point to look at is the nature of the person's seizures. Some seizures are minor and do not pose much risk. They may be the simple partial type, which occur with only an internal feeling or a fleeting sensation. Complex partial seizures and absence seizures are more of a risk during recreation, because of the associated confusion and memory loss. Tonic-clonic seizures, meanwhile, present an even higher level of risk for injury.

Second, it is important to look at how well a person's seizures are controlled. While there is no precise definition of seizure control, patients who have not have seizures for a year or several years are considered to be in good control. Meanwhile, those having several seizures per month have poor seizure control. The boundaries are imprecise, because even after years of being seizure-free another seizure is always possible.

Third, the risk level of an activity should be considered since different recreational activities pose different risks. People with seizures usually can participate in low-risk activities, even if their seizures are not in good control. But a medical care professional first should be consulted

Some low risk activities are running, bowling, golf, baseball, basketball, soccer and volleyball. Medium-risk activities may be done if seizures are mild or infrequent, but of course review your individual circumstances with your medical team. Some medium-risk activities include football, hockey and ice skating, bike racing, gymnastics, horseback riding, swimming in shallow water with a buddy, and boating.

As a general rule, if having a seizure during a recreational activity would likely cause you significant harm, then use common sense and avoid the activity.