

## Managing Seizure Triggers: Tips for Lifestyle Modification

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Developing plans to modify your lifestyle is an important part of seizure preparedness. It's a way that you, as a person with seizures or a parent of a child with seizures, can take charge and play an active role in your epilepsy care.

The following tips are examples of what people can do to manage triggers. Some of these tips may require a change in behavior, others may be ways to adjust your environment or schedule so not everything happens at once. Before choosing tips to try, make sure you've assessed your situation and talked to your doctor and other health care professionals for their suggestions too. Please note that research on the effectiveness of many of these techniques is limited. Many of these tips are common sense suggestions or are from health care professionals and people with epilepsy as to what they have seen and tried.

**Noises:** People who think they are affected by noises should be sure to talk to their doctor about whether they have a form of 'reflex epilepsy' or if general noise or distraction may be a trigger in another way. People with true reflex epilepsy may respond to specific seizure medicines and should talk to their doctor.

Try using earplugs or earphones, especially in noisy or crowded places. Try listening to relaxing music or sounds, or try distracting yourself by singing or focusing on another activity.

**Bright, flashing or fluorescent lights:** Use polarized or tinted glasses. Use natural lighting when indoors. Focus on distant objects when riding in a car to avoid flickering lights or patterns. Avoid discos, strobe lights or flashing bulbs on holiday decorations. Use computer monitor with minimal contrast glare or use a screen filter. Consult with your doctor about other specific recommendations for computer use.

**Sleep:** Try to regulate sleeping habits so you have a consistent schedule and get enough sleep. Keep a log or diary of your sleep patterns, seizures and general well-being. Ask a partner or companion to record his or her observations too. Consider the following ideas to improve sleep.

- Discuss your medicine schedule with your doctor or nurse. Changing times or doses at night may help sleep.
- Limit caffeine and try to avoid it after noon time or mid-afternoon at the latest.
- Avoid alcohol and nicotine prior to sleep.
- Limit working or studying late at night. Stop work at least one hour before bedtime to allow time to relax.
- Exercise in the early evening if possible.
- Take warm showers or have someone give you a back rub before bedtime to decrease muscle tension.

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*Adapted from the Comprehensive Epilepsy Center, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Boston, Massachusetts and the journal "Clinical Nursing Practice in Epilepsy", Spring 1994.*

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- Try relaxation exercises before bedtime.
- Limit naps and don't nap in the early evening.
- If anxious or worried, talk to someone or write down your feelings before going to sleep. Put this away and deal with these worries or concerns in the morning!
- If you can't fall asleep within 15 minutes get up and do something else for 15 minutes. Then go back to bed and try again. Don't toss and turn in bed all night.

**Exercise:** Regular exercise is good for everyone. Pace your exercise to avoid getting too tired or hyperventilation. Avoid exercising in the middle of the day during hot weather. Ask your doctor about any specific exercises you may need to avoid.

**Hyperventilation:** Try relaxation or slow breathing exercises when anxious or if you begin to hyperventilate. Pace your activity and avoid sports that may trigger hyperventilation.

**Diet:** Regulate meal times and patterns around sleep, activity, and medication schedules. Usually taking medicines after food or around meals makes it easier to remember them and may lessen any stomach distress from side effects of medicines. Have a well-balanced diet and eat at consistent times to avoid long periods without food. If your appetite is poor, try small frequent meals instead of skipping meals. Avoid foods and drinks that may aggravate seizures. Not everyone is sensitive to foods, but if you are, talk to your doctor about how to modify your diet. If you are following a diet specifically for your epilepsy, be sure to follow the advice of your doctor and nutritionist.

**Alcohol/Drugs:** Avoid recreational drugs and talk to your doctor about use of alcohol. Avoid alcohol completely if you're going through high-risk times or have recently had surgery. If you choose to drink alcohol, use 'moderation', drink slowly, and have only one or two glasses at a time. Consider carefully what you drink, avoiding 'hard liquor' or mixed drinks that may have high alcohol content. If alcohol and drugs are a problem for you, talk to your doctor and get professional help.

**Hormonal changes:** Both men and women may notice a cyclical pattern to their seizures. Record seizures on a calendar and track them in relation to any changes in hormones. Women who are having menstrual cycles should track their cycle days. Women who have stopped having their menses should track other symptoms or changes, while women who are pregnant should track their pregnancy too. The use of hormonal medicines, such as contraceptives or birth control pills as well as hormonal replacement therapy, may affect seizures in some women, so record the dates and doses of these medicines. NOTE: some seizure medicines may interfere with the effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives making unexpected or unplanned pregnancy more likely. Be sure to talk to your doctor about all contraceptive use.

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When seizures cluster around menses or hormone changes, women should try to modify their lifestyle so other triggers don't occur during this high-risk time. Some women may use 'as needed' medicines to help treat seizures associated with menses. Note the use of these on your calendars and seizure preparedness plan.

**Illness, fever, trauma:** Notify your doctor if you become ill, have a fever, injure yourself seriously, or need other medicines such as antibiotics, painkillers, or cold medicines. Some people may notice that certain medicines can trigger seizures or interfere with seizure medicines. Fevers, other illnesses and injuries may also make you more susceptible and you'll need to monitor your seizures carefully. Try to limit other triggers during these times and talk to your doctor about what medicines you can use.

**Stress, anxiety, depression:** Emotional stress is a common trigger for some people, and stress can be a cause and symptom of mood problems such as anxiety and depression. Track your stress level and mood in relation to your seizures on your diary. During stressful times, consider ways to modify your lifestyle and manage stress better.

- Try counseling to help cope with seizures or other problems.
- Consider support groups for epilepsy, or groups for stress management, therapy, and other support.
- Write down feelings in a diary on a regular basis. It helps you get feelings out, rather than hold them in, and can help you see the issues more clearly.
- Use 'time-out' periods. Just like kids may need a time-out when they are overwhelmed or acting out, so too do adults. Giving yourself a time-out allows you to take a step back from the stressor or situation and think about how best to address it.
- Learn relaxation exercises, deep breathing, yoga, or other strategies that help with stress and general well-being.
- Tell your doctor and nurse how you feel. The effects of stress can be harmful to your seizures, and your life. When mood changes last longer than expected, you may need help from a mental health professional too. If you feel emotionally unsafe, call your doctor or go to an emergency room to be evaluated.

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