

(10) Parents: Managing seizure triggers

Not all seizures have a trigger, many will just happen. Some seizures, however, can be triggered by certain factors or events. Identifying these possible triggers can be a first step towards minimising the risk of a seizure. For example, if seizures are triggered by lack of sleep, addressing the sleep issue with your child's GP or a sleep counsellor can make a difference with seizure control.

Start by keeping a seizure diary

If you suspect your child's seizures may have certain triggers, keep a detailed seizure diary over several months. A seizure diary can also be a useful record to monitor the effectiveness of your child's anti-epileptic drug(s). A seizure diary should note:

- * the number of seizures in a day / week / month
- * the type of seizures (if you do not know the names, a description of the seizure)
- * whether your child was awake or asleep
- * what your child was doing immediately before a seizure
- * anything else which happened before the seizure, ie was your child tired, grumpy, upset or stressed about anything
- * any other factors, such as not feeling well, or having a high temperature

Taking medication as prescribed

Not taking medication regularly as prescribed is one of the most common reasons why someone continues to have seizures. If you sometimes forget to give the medication to your child, link it with a set routine or set your mobile phone alarm to remind you.

If your child experiences side effects, do not be tempted to stop your child's medication, seek medical advice instead. Side effects can often be reduced by

adjusting the dosage or switching to another type of drug, but this can only be done by your child's medical team.

Teenagers can also sometimes be reluctant to take drugs because of potential side effects. Other factors such as drinking / being hung over or sleeping in at weekends can make it difficult for young people to remember to take their medication on time.

You can help your teenage son or daughter make the right decisions by ensuring they know about the potentially serious consequences and risks of stopping or occasionally skipping their drugs.

Alcohol and recreational drugs

Most anti-epileptic drugs do not mix well with binge drinking, drinking regular large amounts of alcohol or taking recreational drugs. All of these can make the medication less effective and result in more frequent seizures. Older children (and adults) sometimes deliberately skip their medication before a night out thinking this will allow them to drink alcohol. Seizures which result from skipping drugs can be worse than seizures resulting from mixing anti-epileptic drugs with alcohol or recreational drugs.

Stress and anxiety

Stress and anxiety can be a trigger for seizures. A positive and supportive approach to your child's epilepsy can help your child adjust a lot quicker to living with this condition. You want to keep your child safe, but an overprotective parent can instill a sense of being 'different'. This can have a negative impact on a child's self-esteem and sense of self-worth. It can also unintentionally create a stressful environment for a child.

Stress and anxiety can also result from external factors not linked to epilepsy. Problems at school, the loss of a pet, or a family bereavement can put a child under a lot of stress. If you feel stress is a contributing factor to your child's seizures,

where possible, try and address it or get professional help. Your child's doctor or specialist nurse can offer guidance or refer your child to a psychologist or local Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service for further support if this is necessary.

School related triggers

Bullying, name calling, exam stress, peer pressure or staying up late to revise, can make a child stressed and anxious. This can in turn increase seizure frequency. If you notice your child's seizures are getting worse around exam times, any other school related events, or after starting a new school, speak to the school for further advice and support.

Sleep problems

Too little or interrupted sleep can sometimes trigger a seizure. If possible, try to address the cause as soon as possible. If you need further help, discuss this with your doctor or epilepsy nurse and consider asking for a referral to a sleep counsellor. There is more information on dealing with sleep problems in our Parent's factsheet No 18.

Hormonal changes

Onset of puberty and changes in hormonal levels may affect a girl's seizures. Sometimes, seizures become more frequent or occur only around the time of a girl's menstrual period. Keeping a seizure diary can be helpful to identify if there is a likely link between a girl's periods and seizures. A consultant will, if necessary, prescribe additional 'booster' medication to be taken around this time of the month.

Hormonal changes can also affect a boy's seizures as they go through puberty and get older. This may sometimes require a change in medication or dose to manage a possible increase in seizures.

Flashing or flickering lights

Many people assume that anyone with epilepsy is sensitive to flashing or flickering lights. In fact, only 3% of children (and adults) with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy. A specialist will usually have checked for this via a routine EEG test. If a child is not photosensitive, watching TV or playing computer games will be safe. If your child has photosensitive epilepsy, the doctor will try and control this with drugs, so that regular activities do not need to be restricted.

The following precautions can help reduce risks of seizures resulting from flashing or flickering lights for those who are photosensitive:

- * Get your child to watch TV in a well-lit room and at eye level. Generally, smaller TVs are safer, however, it is not really the size of the TV but how much of it fills the field of vision. Sitting further away from the screen can compensate for having a bigger TV screen.
- * TV programme makers have a duty to give warnings about flashing or flickering lights before a programme starts so you have time to switch off your TV or turn over to another channel. Some people have also found that when faced with flashing or flickering light, covering one eye with one hand can sometimes prevent a seizure.
- * Modern TV and computer screens are considered to be safe because they work at a higher frequency and do not flicker.
- * However, flickering or flashing content can still trigger a seizure. You may want to watch a computer game first to check the content for flashing or flickering patterns or light effects.
- * Playing games for many hours without a break can be tiring, possibly triggering a seizure. Make sure your child has frequent breaks and time away from the computer.

- * Light patterns that occur naturally, such as sunlight reflecting off water, or sunshine through trees can also be a trigger for seizures. Polarised sunglasses (available from most opticians) can help reduce reflection and glare but they are unlikely to prevent seizures.
- * Faulty flickering lights can be another trigger for some people. A small number of people also believe they are affected by fluorescent light bulbs.
- * Strobe lighting used in clubs or at concerts can sometimes trigger seizures. This is, however, rare as most strobe lights do not flicker at the sensitive rate. Covering one eye with one hand when exposed to strobe lighting can sometimes help to prevent a seizure. On balance, stopping your child from enjoying social activities with their friends may have a worse impact on their self-esteem and confidence than a small risk of having a seizure.

Eating regularly

Low blood sugar levels can occasionally trigger a seizure. Regular meals at home and a packed lunch, including some healthy snacks for in between, will help a child control their blood sugar. Some anti-epileptic drugs can reduce a child's appetite. This is rare but if your child is affected by low appetite, seek medical advice.

Vitamins and supplements

Most children should not need vitamins and supplements. A healthy balanced diet can have a much more positive impact on a child's seizure control than taking many supplements. If there is a specific reason for wanting to add vitamins and supplements to your child's diet, consult your child's doctor, epilepsy specialist nurse, a dietician or nutritional therapist first as some vitamins and mineral supplements are known to interfere with seizure control.

Food triggers

Some people believe there may be a possible link between certain food types or additives and seizures. There is, however, no scientific evidence of this and many medical experts do not believe these food triggers exist.

There is some anecdotal evidence that aspartame (artificial sweetener found in many foods and drinks) and monosodium glutamate (a flavor enhancer used in processed food) can affect some children and adults by triggering seizures. If you suspect that your child may be sensitive to any food additives, start with keeping a food diary for a few weeks and record any seizures in it.

Avoiding artificial additives can be difficult as these can be found in many food items and often appear under different names. If you start cutting out certain foods, make sure your child continues to have a healthy balanced diet. If in doubt, consult with your doctor or a dietician first.

Feeling unwell

Running a temperature and feeling unwell can make some children more susceptible to seizures. The 'flu vaccine is often offered to children with epilepsy, as a precaution. This is not because a child is more likely to catch the 'flu with epilepsy. However, 'flu symptoms, such as running a temperature, vomiting, diarrhoea, tiredness, dehydration, or not eating can be seizure triggers. Your child's doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse will be able to advise whether your child should have the vaccine.

There is no evidence to suggest that the 'flu vaccine may interfere with seizure control and / or anti-epileptic drugs.