

(13) Parents: Sport and leisure

People who take regular exercise and are physically active often have better control over their seizures than those who do not.

Epilepsy should not stop your child from being active and enjoying life. Risks associated with specific activities can often be reduced with precautions. Even activities, such as rock climbing, can be safe if these are properly supervised and harnessed. Your child will benefit from having a wide range of experiences.

Parents can sometimes become overprotective, particularly during the first few months after diagnosis. Confidence usually grows with time as you become more familiar with your child's epilepsy. The emphasis should always be on 'can do' with sensible adjustments and precautions, rather than an outright 'no'.

Assessing risks

Your child's doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse can advise on whether a certain sport or activity is safe, taking into account your child's seizures and other factors. The following questions may also help you assess the risks of an activity:

- * What types of seizures does my child have?
- * How frequent are they?
- * Is there any kind of warning?
- * Does my child have any triggers?
- * What risks does this sport have in general?
- * Who is supervising it?
- * Is my child going to be alone?
- * Will there be someone who knows what to do if my child has a seizure?

Talking to other parents and finding out how they made certain activities safer for their child will also help you come to a decision.

School trips

A school cannot exclude a child from educational trips simply because they have epilepsy. Any restrictions on health and safety grounds would need to be justified following a risk assessment looking at the child's unique epilepsy and seizures.

The risk assessment would need to take into account how easy it would be to get help if a child needed emergency medical care. Only if there is a considerable risk that cannot be removed or minimised by some adjustments would a school be able to refuse a child a place on a school trip. The same goes for any other school leisure activities.

Contact sports

All apart from boxing are usually considered to be safe. If a child's epilepsy was caused by a head injury, a doctor will probably advise against playing any kind of contact sports as a precaution. If in doubt, consult your child's doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse for further advice.

Swimming

Swimming will keep a child healthy and active. If seizures are well controlled, or seizure patterns are predictable, the risk may be minimal if swimming takes place in a pool which is supervised by a qualified lifeguard who has been made aware of the child's epilepsy. Other precautions include swimming at the shallow end of the pool, swimming at less busy times, and avoiding swimming altogether when seizures are more likely such as during a medication change.

If seizures are frequent and complex, it might be necessary for another person to be present in the pool. That person would need to be physically capable of supporting the child during a seizure and keeping their head above water at all times.

Generally, any adult supervising a child in the pool should know what to do if the child has a seizure.

Even swimming in a loch, sea or river can be made safe provided the child is supervised at all times with an adult swimming alongside the child. Never let your child swim in open waters during times when seizures are more likely.

Riding a bike

Anyone who rides a bike should wear a cycle helmet. Younger children should usually be accompanied by an adult who knows what to do in case the child has a seizure. How much supervision is needed depends on the age of the child or how busy the roads are. If your child is out with friends, encourage them to explain to their friends what to do if they have a seizure.

Cycling on off-road cycle paths tends to be safer than busy roads but avoid routes along canals or rivers.

Watching TV or playing computer games

If your child has photosensitive epilepsy, please read our Parent's factsheet No 10. If your child is not affected by this, then these activities will usually not affect their epilepsy. Ensure your child takes plenty of breaks though as tiredness resulting from playing computer games for hours can sometimes trigger seizures.

Strobe lighting and going out

Most strobe lights do not flicker at a rate which is likely to trigger a seizure, but there is a small risk if a child has photosensitive epilepsy (Parent's factsheet 'No 10 Managing seizure triggers'). It is unlikely that a venue will agree to switch off strobe lighting even if they are told in advance, so encourage your child to tell their friends about their epilepsy and explain what to do in case of a seizure.

Young people should also be aware of other potential triggers which often go hand in hand with going out, such as drinking alcohol or taking drugs, and not getting enough sleep. Where possible, restrict late nights to those times when your son / daughter

does not have to get up early the next day. Sleeping a few hours before going out may also help reduce any risks of seizures due to tiredness.

Going on a sleepover

Speak to the host parents and let them know what your child's seizures are like and how to keep your child safe during a seizure. It may help to break the ice with other parents if you agree to host the first couple of sleepovers yourself.