

(18) Parents – Dealing with sleep problems

Link between epilepsy and sleep problems

Epilepsy and seizures can sometimes affect sleep, which can be caused by the following:

- * It can occasionally be a side effect of some anti-epileptic drugs
- * Epilepsy in itself can also disrupt sleep patterns, particularly if a child has frequent nocturnal seizures
- * Sleep in between seizures may not be deep and restful, and a child may also have trouble falling asleep
- * Sleep problems can also be psychological. A child may be afraid of going to sleep in case a seizure happens

Treatment options

A change in anti-epileptic drugs and / or dosage can sometimes reduce any side-effects, including sleep problems, and may also improve seizure control. Discuss any problems with your child's doctor or specialist nurse who will decide on the most appropriate course of action. This could, for example, be a referral to a specialist sleep nurse.

A doctor may sometimes prescribe melatonin, which is a hormone that occurs naturally in the body. This is, however, only done after a thorough sleep assessment and management plan and is generally limited to children with complex neurological problems rather than epilepsy alone. Melatonin cannot be bought over the counter and needs to be prescribed by a specialist as it can have side effects.

Help from Sleep Scotland

Sleep Scotland www.sleepscotland.org supports families of children and young people with an additional support need and severe sleep problems. You can contact them on their support line 0800 138 6565 for practical advice as well as a listening ear.

Sleep Scotland also run sleep clinics and have trained sleep counsellors on hand. These are mainly professionals who are experienced in working with families and carers of children with additional support needs. Their background may be health, social work or education and they are usually employed by local authorities and health boards. Some of the sleep counsellors are parents who have been through similar difficulties and have been successful in sorting out any problems.

These professionals will work with your family at a clinic or may be observing your child at home. They will look at your child's sleep history and any behavioural issues and may ask you to keep a sleep diary. Sleep problems can be effectively treated using special techniques.

Your child's doctor or consultant can make a referral to a sleep counsellor.

Adopting a good sleep routine

A good sleep routine should be calm and gentle and should be repeated at the same time every night. Start off by engaging your child in a calming activity. Use the same vocal cue, ie "time for bed" every time. Once your child is in bed, make some time for cuddles and / or reading a calming bedtime story, then dim the lights. If your child demands attention try to ignore this and do not engage in any lengthy discussions. Simply repeat your set phrase and walk away.

Even if you do not experience sleep problems in your family, it is worth adopting these kinds of bedtime strategies. This will benefit any child and can often prevent a child with epilepsy developing future sleep issues.