

Recreational drugs and seizures

Taking recreational drugs can both cause seizures, and affect your seizure control if you have epilepsy. This factsheet gives details of different recreational drugs, and the effect these may have on your epilepsy.

Recreational drugs

Recreational drugs, whether legal or illegal, (including those that were formerly known as 'legal highs') can be made up of many different ingredients. There are no regulations to control their quality because most recreational drugs are illegal. Just like alcohol, each person reacts differently to each drug.

Regular and, for some people, even one-off, drug use can trigger seizures. Even drugs which are considered to be 'natural' such as cannabis or magic mushrooms can often trigger seizures.

Having a seizure as a result of taking drugs does not automatically mean having epilepsy, however, prolonged drug use can cause epilepsy.

If you have epilepsy, you need to know many of the drugs are stimulants and can lower your seizure threshold. This has the potential to trigger a seizure. If you take more than one type of drug or take it with alcohol you will further increase your risk of seizures.

Taking drugs can also lead to disturbed or lack of sleep, dehydration, missing meals or forgetting to take your anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). These also are common seizure triggers.

Anabolic steroids

Anabolic steroids are sometimes used by athletes and bodybuilders. Anyone who has epilepsy is advised not to take these as they may change the level of anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) in the blood and may make seizures more likely.

High energy drinks

High energy drinks and caffeine “shots”, which are high in caffeine, are becoming very popular. Caffeine is a stimulant. If consumed in large quantities it can trigger seizures in some people as it can lower your seizure threshold.

Even drinking large amounts of tea or coffee, including some fizzy drinks, can increase the likelihood of having a seizure. A few cups of tea or coffee a day, however, is generally considered to be safe for people with epilepsy.

If you suspect caffeine may be a seizure trigger for you, try, if possible, to avoid caffeine. Many types of drinks, food and even medication can contain caffeine, such as green tea, cocoa, cola, and chocolate. You can also find caffeine in other less well known substances such as guarana and maté, which are herbal remedies. Common cold remedies and painkillers, which you can buy over the counter, often contain caffeine. If you regularly take high levels of caffeine you are advised to cut the caffeine back slowly to avoid withdrawal symptoms or even a withdrawal seizure.

Solvent abuse

There is some evidence that persistent solvent abuse or ‘sniffing’ everyday products such as lighter fuel, glue, aerosols, correction fluids, petrol or nail varnish, can cause seizures. In some cases the person may go on to develop epilepsy.

Getting advice and support

If you are concerned about your use of drugs and the effect this may have on your epilepsy, or if you need help to come off recreational drugs and caffeine, speak to your epilepsy specialist nurse, GP or practice nurse.

Other agencies can also give impartial and confidential advice on drugs in general, such as:

Know the Score, 0800 587 587 9 <http://knowthescore.info/>

Frank, 0800 77 66 00 <http://talktofrank.com/>

Narcotics Anonymous, 0300 999 12 12 www.ukna.org

Re-Solv Scotland, 07505 000024, www.re-solv.org/