

Staying healthy at work

These guidelines are for all employees regardless of whether they have a long term condition or not. It is important for all employees to take regular breaks, ensure that they eat regularly and work in a safe and comfortable environment. Some jobs make it difficult to take breaks. Some people choose to work through their breaks and not take them, or skip lunch because they are too busy. Doing these things has an effect on everyone's health but it can affect seizure control for a person with epilepsy.

The effect of having a seizure at work will depend on the type of seizure and the person's workplace. The Health and Safety Executive requires that risks associated with seizures have been assessed in relation to each workplace.

There are some triggers that are common to most people with epilepsy. Being tired, not taking breaks, being dehydrated, hungry or stressed are among the common triggers.

Regular breaks

It is important to get regular breaks at work. Sitting in front of a computer or machinery for a long period of is tiring. It is also known that tiredness can trigger seizures. Current guidance from the Health and Safety Executive suggests that you take 5-10 minute breaks from computer work every 50-60 minutes.

Eating regularly through the day is very important. Skipping meals is a seizure trigger because your blood sugar levels can drop. Being dehydrated is also a common trigger for seizures. Make sure you drink plenty of water throughout the day. Going to get a glass of water can provide the break you need from your work.

Environment

Some people's seizures can be triggered by getting too hot. Make sure your work environment is at a comfortable temperature. If you are prone to having seizures at work, ensure that the area where you work is as safe as possible. Your Line Manager should carry out a risk assessment.

Some people think that a person with epilepsy cannot use a computer. This is not the case. Modern LCD flat screens do not flicker, unlike the old style cathode ray tube monitors but these are no longer used by work places. Computers can, however, still cause some issues if the content of the programme used contains flashing or flickering lights, or repetitive or fast moving patterns. Some people who do not have photosensitive epilepsy may still experience some discomfort, particularly when working for a long time without a break.

Ensure that your work area is well lit. Any broken or flickering lights should be fixed immediately in case the flickering falls within the range that can trigger photosensitive epilepsy.

Keeping people informed

It is your choice whether you disclose that you have epilepsy unless there is a health and safety risk if you had a seizure at work. Examples are where you operate machinery or work at heights.

If you choose to inform your employer or colleagues about your epilepsy it can be a good idea to let them know what happens when you have a seizure. Information they might want to know includes how frequent your seizures are, what triggers them, what they look like, how long they last and how long you need to rest afterwards.

Overtime

Many people work extra hours because of deadlines. If you do work late, remember the most common triggers for seizures are:

- Being tired
- Skipping meals
- Getting dehydrated
- Feeling stressed
- Not taking medication on time

If you are working later than usual, it is important to make sure that you have thought about possible seizure triggers so you stay as healthy as possible.

Not getting enough sleep

We all generally perform better after a good night's sleep. Sleep is especially important if you have epilepsy.

If you don't get enough sleep, you may be more likely to have a seizure. Some types of seizures, like myoclonic seizures (sudden jerks of your arms, head or whole body), are more likely when a person is tired or just waking up. The reason why too little sleep affects seizures is unclear. We do know that significant changes happen in brain activity when people are asleep and when they waken. These changes may trigger seizures. Hormonal changes that happen while you sleep may also be a trigger. Anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) can also affect the quality of your sleep.

If you find that being tired leads to more seizures, make sure you get plenty of rest and avoid too many late nights.

If you have trouble sleeping, speak to your doctor. This could be a side effect of the anti-epileptic medication you take. Your doctor may be able to prescribe something that will help you sleep.

If you are feeling stressed or anxious about something in your life, this can affect your sleep as well. Finding ways to relax will help you to sleep better. You could try learning a relaxation technique such as meditation or yoga.

Working night shifts

Some people who work night shifts have trouble sleeping during the day. If you find that being tired is likely to trigger a seizure for you, avoid working night shifts if you can.

Under the Equality Act, your employer has to consider making “reasonable adjustments” if you have epilepsy. Ask your employer if working during the day is an option. Allowing you to work during the day instead of nights could be a reasonable adjustment.

It is important to remember that not getting enough sleep may mean that you are more tired during the day. Being tired is also dangerous when driving or operating machinery.