

# Sleep and epilepsy

Not sleeping well and tiredness can be a common seizure trigger for many people. On the other hand, some people only ever have their seizures during sleep. This factsheet explains the link between sleep and seizures, and gives you more information on how to tackle sleep issues.

## *What happens when we sleep?*

When we sleep at night we move in and out of various sleep cycles, which get repeated throughout our sleep. Sleep cycles are divided into non-REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and REM stages.

We move from a light stage, where we start to relax and our breathing and heart rate slows down to a deep stage, which is hardest to wake from. The last stage in a sleep cycle is REM (rapid eye movement), characterised by quick eye movements. This is the stage where we process, make sense of and store information into our long-term memory. It plays a particularly important role in our brain's ability to learn and remember.

## What is the link between sleep and seizures?

The reason why too little sleep affects seizures is still unclear. We know that moving from one type of sleep to another and waking up causes significant changes in the brain's electrical and hormonal activity. These changes may trigger seizures. This could explain why some people have all of their seizures while asleep, and why others have more seizures when their sleep is disrupted.

Some types of seizures, like myoclonic seizures (i.e. sudden jerks of your arms, head or whole body), are more likely when a person is tired or just after waking up.

## Other effects of sleep deprivation

Struggling to sleep can also affect your memory, mood, and concentration during the day. After a sleepless night, we are more likely to eat unhealthy foods to give us an instant energy kick or turn to caffeine. Sleep also plays a big part in how well our immune system functions. Improving your sleep could have a profound impact on your physical and mental health.

## Sleep seizures

Some people refer to sleep seizures as nocturnal seizures, but sleep seizures can happen whenever you are asleep, i.e. day or night. Sleep seizures during the night generally make your sleep lighter, and you tend to wake up more often. Studies also suggest that sleep seizures can reduce the amount of REM sleep you get, which is important for processing

emotions, information and storing memories.

## How to improve your sleep

Improving your sleep routine and pattern does not have to be difficult. Sometimes simple changes can be incredibly effective without having to resort to specialist advice. But do not hesitate to get medical advice if your sleep issues are more complex, especially if they are related to the medication you take, or mental health struggles.

## Check how much sleep you get

There is no magic formula as to how many hours of sleep is enough. On average adults should aim for seven to eight hours sleep. By contrast a school aged child needs around nine to eleven hours. The younger the child, the more sleep they need.

Going to bed too late on a regular basis or having your sleep disrupted too often can have a major impact on your physical and mental health. It can also make your seizures worse.

Change your bedtime routine and establish a regular sleep pattern, i.e. set a specific time to go to bed and get up in the morning. It might take some practice to get into the habit, but it is worth the effort.

## Watch out for side effects of anti-epileptic drugs

Difficulty sleeping can sometimes be a side effect of some anti-epileptic

drugs. The drug's patient information leaflet will give you more information on expected and common side effects. Always seek medical advice from your epilepsy specialist nurse or GP if you suspect it might be your medication causing the sleep issues.

Never stop or make changes to your medication yourself, always speak to your medical team. Your GP may also be able to prescribe further medication which can help with your sleep.

### *Look after your mental health*

Mental health struggles can affect every aspect of our life including how we look after ourselves, what we eat, how active we are etc. All of this can affect the quality of our sleep.

For mild to moderate anxiety and stress, calming activities before bed can be helpful. This could for example be doing some yoga, breathing exercises, listening to calming music or reading a book. Always seek medical advice if you are affected by constant low mood or anxiety.

### *Clean up your diet*

Our brain needs the right nutrition to fully function. A diet high in fat, sugar, salt, or processed foods, can affect your physical and emotional wellbeing. Start by cutting out some of the junk foods and replace with healthier options, and drink more water. Even small changes can make you feel better within yourself, which potentially will improve your sleep.

Eating too late in the evening can also impact on how well you sleep. Your

muscles which digest your food have to keep working when they should be relaxing. This can make it difficult for you to fall asleep. You are also more likely to wake up not feeling refreshed. Leave a few hours between your last meal and going to bed to give your body time to digest. If you are hungry before bedtime, have a light snack only.

### *Reduce your caffeine intake*

Caffeine consumed in the later afternoon/evening can stop you from sleeping. The general rule of thumb is not to consume any caffeine about six hours before you go to bed.

This may vary from person to person depending on how sensitive you are to caffeine and how much you usually consume. If you have constant trouble sleeping, have a look at your overall caffeine consumption. Apart from coffee and tea, caffeine can also be found in energy drinks, over-the-counter pain medications, and even chocolate.

Large daily amounts of caffeine can also make you jittery and more stressed, which can also affect the quality of sleep.

### *Avoid alcohol/recreational drugs in the evening*

Every person is different and tolerates alcohol in different ways. For some drinking in moderation is ok, and is less likely to affect sleep. For others, even one drink before bedtime can affect their sleep.

Alcohol can reduce your REM sleep and lead to sleep disruptions, especially if you drink regularly in the evening. Also, worth bearing in mind

some anti-epileptic drugs do not mix well with alcohol, potentially making them less effective. Your pharmacist or epilepsy specialist nurse can give you more information about this.

Some recreational drugs have a stimulating effect, and regular use of these drugs can lead to severe sleep deprivation.

If you want help with cutting down alcohol and recreational drugs, do not hesitate to speak to your GP or contact some of the specialist drug and alcohol helplines.

### *Reduce smoking before bedtime*

There is some evidence that suggests that smoking can be associated with sleep issues, as nicotine is a stimulant.

If you want to give up smoking, make use of smoking cessation programmes offered by your GP. Take it slowly and choose the right time to give up smoking, especially if stress is a potential seizure trigger for you.

### *Set up a calming routine before sleep*

Generally, avoid doing anything that stimulates before you go to bed. We need to set ourselves up for sleep by calming down activities. Switch off your TV and stop scrolling through your social media pages one hour before bedtime, as the blue light emitted from mobile devices can stop the production of an important sleep hormone. You can also switch your device to night mode to reduce exposure to the blue light.

Exercising too close to bedtime can also make it difficult to fall asleep.

And finally, look at your bedroom set up. It should be a quiet and dark space, with a comfortable temperature.

## Working night shifts

People with epilepsy may need to avoid working night shifts, especially if seizures are triggered by lack of sleep and tiredness. Working during the night and sleeping during the day can mess with your sleep cycles, leaving you more tired and sleep deprived, especially if you regularly switch between day and night shifts.

## Reasonable adjustments

Epilepsy is a condition which meets the definition of a disability under the Equality Act. This gives you the right to ask for a reasonable adjustment at your place of work. A reasonable adjustment could be asking for day instead of night shifts if your seizures are triggered by tiredness.

If you have sleep seizures during the night, you may feel tired in the morning and struggle to get to work on time. A reasonable adjustment could be to ask for a later starting time to give you more time in the morning.

## Further information

We have a separate factsheet on [Sleep seizures](#). This is free to download or request from us by calling 0808 800 2200 or emailing

[contact@epilepsyscotland.org.uk](mailto:contact@epilepsyscotland.org.uk).

You are also welcome to contact our freephone helpline 0808 800 2200, email [contact@epilepsyscotland.org.uk](mailto:contact@epilepsyscotland.org.uk) or private message us on our social media channels for more information and support.

Your GP may be able to refer you to a sleep counsellor for further help and support with sleep issues.

[Sleep Scotland](#) can support families if their child has trouble sleeping. Check out their website for more information or email them at [sleepsupport@sleepscotland.org](mailto:sleepsupport@sleepscotland.org).

And finally, the [National Sleep Helpline](#) on 0330 530 541 offers more advice and guidance to anyone affected by sleep issues.

**Our resources are always free. If you would like to support our work please text FACTS to 70085 to donate £3. Texts cost £3 plus one standard rate message.**



[www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk](http://www.epilepsyscotland.org.uk)

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