

## Epilepsy: an introduction

The aim of this leaflet is to tell you about things that may affect you, if you have been diagnosed with epilepsy. More information about all the topics covered is available from Epilepsy Action.

### About epilepsy

If you have epilepsy, it means that you may sometimes have seizures (also called fits). There are many types of seizure and everybody has different experiences of epilepsy.

### About seizures

Electrical activity is happening in your brain all the time. A seizure happens when there is a sudden burst of intense electrical activity. This is often called epileptic activity. It causes the brain's messages to become mixed up and the result is an epileptic seizure.

How seizures affect you depends on which areas of your brain are affected by the epileptic activity. Some people lose consciousness during a seizure, other people do not. Some people experience strange sensations, or parts of their body might twitch or jerk. Sometimes people fall to the floor and convulse. This is when they jerk violently as their muscles tighten and relax over and over again.

Seizures usually last between a few seconds and several minutes. After a seizure, your brain and body will usually return to normal.

Some people only ever have seizures when they are awake. Other people only ever have seizures when they are asleep. Some people have a mixture of both.

### What causes epilepsy?

Sometimes epilepsy is caused by damage to a person's brain. The damage may have been caused by a difficult birth, a severe blow to the head or a stroke, for example. Or the damage

may be the result of an infection of the brain, such as meningitis. However, for around six in every 10 people with epilepsy, there is no known cause.

### Living with epilepsy

#### Driving

If you have epilepsy and you have a seizure, you will usually have to stop driving and inform the DVLA or DVA. Contact Epilepsy Action, the DVLA or the DVA for up-to-date advice about the driving rules.

#### Entitlements

If you have epilepsy, you can get all your medical prescriptions free of charge. If you live in England or Scotland you will need an exemption certificate. Ask at your doctor's surgery for an application form.

If you can't drive because of your epilepsy, you are also entitled to the following.

- A Disabled Person's Railcard.
- Free or half-fare bus travel, at certain times of day.

#### Safety

If you have epilepsy here are some things you can do to help yourself, in case you have a seizure.

- Consider telling other people about your epilepsy and how they can help you if you have a seizure.
- Consider carrying an epilepsy identity card or wearing identity jewellery.
- Think about any safety precautions you may need to take. For example, have a shower instead of a bath if your seizures are not controlled.
- If you live alone, find out about the special alarms that are available to alert someone if you need help.

## Sport and leisure

Having epilepsy shouldn't stop you from taking part in most sports and leisure activities. As long as you take proper safety measures, there aren't many sports you need to avoid. It can be helpful to have a friend with you, who knows about your epilepsy and what to do if you have a seizure. It is also advisable to tell an instructor or supervisor, so they can help if you have a seizure.

## Alcohol

Having epilepsy and taking anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) does not have to mean that you can't drink alcohol at all. There are some reasons why you might choose to limit how much alcohol you drink or choose not to drink alcohol at all.

- Alcohol can make the side-effects of some AEDs worse.
- Drinking a lot, or binge drinking, can cause you to have 'withdrawal seizures'.

If you do drink alcohol, make sure you take your AEDs as usual. If you miss a dose, this increases the risk that you will have a seizure.

## Equality laws

In the UK there are some laws which say that everyone has the right to be treated fairly at work or when using services. If you have epilepsy, these laws can help you. They aim to protect you from being treated unfairly because of your epilepsy.

People in England, Scotland and Wales are covered by the Equality Act (EA). People in Northern Ireland are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA).

### About this publication

Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information in its publications but cannot be held liable for any actions taken based on this information.

Date: August 2011; Due for review: August 2013; Code: F077.01

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