

# Physical Activity and Leisure



Some people living with epilepsy are concerned about how exercise might affect their condition. Fortunately, exercise has not been found to increase seizure activity in most people, and can actually form an important part of epilepsy management.

## EPILEPSY AND EXERCISE

There are many reasons why exercise helps people with epilepsy live a healthy life.

Firstly, depending on the choice of activity, exercise maintains physical fitness, strength, flexibility, endurance and overall health. This applies to most people, not just those living with epilepsy.

Secondly, exercise contributes to good mental health, which may be particularly relevant to people living with epilepsy, as they experience higher rates of depression and anxiety. Exercise reduces symptoms of stress and releases hormones which contribute to a positive mood.

Thirdly, the sense of accomplishment associated with exercise can contribute to positive self-esteem. Doing your best and seeing progress usually feels pretty good!

Finally, exercise can be part of maintaining an active social life. Some people living with epilepsy can experience feelings of isolation due to a number of factors, including not being able to drive. Participating in social sport or leisure activities in your local area, for example, can help you stay more connected to the community.

## SWIMMING AND WATER SAFETY

Many New Zealanders enjoy swimming and water activities during the summer months. Spending time in the water is often a social activity, providing a chance to exercise and a way of staying cool on hot days.

People living with epilepsy can be very competent and confident swimmers. However, seizures that

occur in the water can lead to serious injuries and even death. Because of this, if you live with epilepsy, or care for someone who does, it is a good idea to take some precautions so that time spent in the water is as safe as possible.

Below are some tips and strategies to assist people living with epilepsy and those who support them to stay safe in the water. It also provides first aid tips should you need to assist someone who has experienced a seizure in water.

- Seek advice from your doctor about any factors that could affect your safety in the water. Be prepared for the possibility that your doctor may suggest that, for your own safety, spending time in the water is not a good idea for you.
- Only swim with someone you know, who is familiar with your type of seizures, understands exactly what to do should you experience a seizure in water, and feels confident that they could provide first aid. Ensure that this person can provide you with one-on-one supervision.
- If at the pool or beach, it's a good idea to let the lifeguard know that you have a history of seizures.
- Consider wearing bathers or a swimming cap which is bright and visible so that lifeguards can easily identify you, particularly if your seizures are uncontrolled.
- People with uncontrolled seizures should wear a life-jacket or buoyancy vest in the water.
- Swim early in the day if your seizures are triggered by heat or fatigue.
- Do not swim or enter water if you are feeling unwell, tired, have missed your medication, and/or are experiencing any signs of a possible seizure.

## WHERE TO EXERCISE CAUTION

It is important for people living with epilepsy to experience as much of life as possible, as well as pursue their interests and passions. However, some sports and physical activities have a higher risk of injury for people living with epilepsy and may also put bystanders at risk. The level of risk is very individual and depends on a number of factors including the level of seizure control.

Some activities, such as the ones noted below, can be particularly risky for a person living with epilepsy:

- Gymnastics
- Horseback riding
- Boxing
- Contact karate
- Motor sports
- Go-carting



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- Mountain climbing
- Skiing
- Snowboarding
- Skateboarding
- Swimming
- Canoeing, kayaking and white-water rafting
- Sailing
- Wind surfing
- Water skiing
- Fishing
- Scuba diving
- Aviation sports
- Ice hockey
- Ice skating
- Solo hang gliding
- Solo parachuting
- Solo paragliding.

So, before commencing a particular sport or activity it is a good idea to consider any potential epilepsy-related risks. Depending on a person's seizure types and frequency it may be recommended that certain activities only be undertaken in conjunction with someone and under supervision. Because of risk of drowning, it is important to exercise caution when in or around water. It may be a good idea to speak to your doctor before commencing higher-risk activities for guidance based on your particular situation.

## EPILEPSY TREATMENTS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

For some people with epilepsy, the side-effects of anti-seizure medication drugs (ASMs) can include things like tiredness, blurred vision or weight gain, which can impact on their ability or motivation to participate fully in physical activity. If you have concerns about participating in a sport or physical activity due to your medication, have a chat with your doctor about potential solutions.

If you have undergone any surgery for epilepsy, you need to avoid contact sports for several months, and sometimes over a year. This includes rugby, football, soccer, basketball, netball and martial arts. Other activities such as rock climbing, trampolining, gymnastics, horse riding, tennis, bike riding, go-carting, and playing on monkey bars are also off limits. Your skull needs plenty of

time to heal, and as a rule, you should avoid any activity where there is a chance that you could be hit on the head. The exact amount of time to avoid these activities depends on your situation and can be negotiated with your treating doctor.