

# Risk and epilepsy



*When looking at strategies to reduce risk and improve safety for a person of any age who lives with epilepsy and a cognitive disability there are a number of things to consider.*

*A home or supported accommodation facility safety assessment can be performed by a registered Occupational Therapist who can make recommendations to ensure the person's safety and reduce risk.*



## Risk and epilepsy

Research indicates that people who live with epilepsy and a cognitive disability have lower rates of seizure freedom and higher rates of morbidity and mortality. This makes managing epilepsy-related risks important for the person's safety.

Managing risk is about identifying the impact of seizures or medications and putting in place strategies to manage them.

Depending on the seizure type there may also be a number of safety issues which need to be considered. This may include the use of safety devices, assistive technology, and/or having on-call or in-house support overnight.

## What does this mean for the person?

Managing risk is an important part of the epilepsy management process. The first step in managing risk is identifying the risk factors that apply to each person. Just as each person's epilepsy is different, each person's risk assessment will be specific to them.

For a person living with epilepsy and a cognitive disability, the level of risk will depend on a number of factors.

When evaluating risk and safety matters consider whether the person:

- lives independently in their own home with a partner or family?
- lives independently in their own home alone?
- lives independently in their own home with carer support visits?
- lives in a supported care environment?

The person's capacity to understand risks is also a consideration, as ensuring that the person is aware of potential risks and knowing why strategies have been put in place will help to increase their safety. If the person has limited communication or comprehension capacity it is important to use person-centred approaches and tools that will assist them to understand risks and safety strategies. A person-centred approach places the person at the centre of all discussions, plans and choices taking into account their life experience, values, culture, interests, beliefs and goals.

The degree of independence and support available to the person has a direct impact on risk and safety management. When managing risks, it is important to look at strategies that will either remove or reduce potential risks.

Risk management considerations:

- living independently or alone carries risk if no one can enter the house to assist when needed. Key box locks are a way of allowing other people to gain entry to the home in the event of an emergency.
- medical alerts can assist by recognising if the person has a fall, whether while standing or in a wheelchair.
- floor surfaces can present trip or slip hazards; so minimise surface clutter and ensure there are no loose floor coverings.
- bed pillows present a suffocation risk in the event of night seizures. Firm pillows or anti-suffocation pillows are considered safer to use.

> Refer to [Travelling, transport and epilepsy](#) information sheet

- falls present a risk of hitting furniture or items in the home, so limiting clutter within the home reduces the risk of injury in the event of a fall.
- reduce the risk of injury by avoiding working or walking on ladders and ledges.
- swimming carries a risk of drowning and an observer or swimming companion trained in seizure first aid should always be present.
- should seizures which result in falling occur regularly, minimising the risk of head injury by wearing a helmet may be recommended.
- reduce the risk of falls when shopping or in the community by being aware of the immediate environment, keeping hands free as a support or being accompanied by a companion.

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Bathing and bathrooms carry additional risks for people with epilepsy. Consider:

- fitting bathroom and toilet doors that open outward rather than inward or install safety/lift off hinges, that make it easier to open the door in case of a fall
- using a shower, as this is safer than a bath because it reduces the risk of drowning should a seizure occur
- using a shower chair, as this is safer than standing in a shower in the event of a fall
- attaching a shower head/rose to a bath tap and taking a shower sitting down with the bath plug out can reduce the risk of drowning should a seizure occur.

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Kitchens can present many hazards due to heat, sharp knives and wet surfaces. Consider using a microwave instead of the stovetop and a food processor rather than a knife to reduce risks associated with seizures that involve involuntary movements, loss of consciousness or falls.

Take care with floor surfaces in wet areas to minimise the risk of slipping or tripping.

Driving, transport and travelling carry additional risks for people with epilepsy.

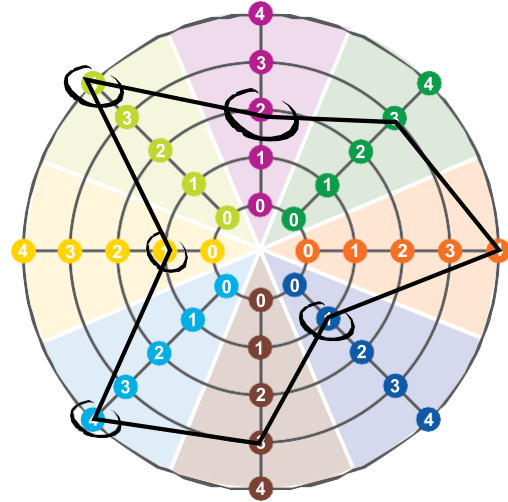
## What can you do to help?

Consider the following strategies to support the person manage the risks associated with their epilepsy and seizure activity.

- Control any potential risks by ensuring that all disability support staff and carers understand the impacts of epilepsy and are trained in reading and understanding the person's Seizure Management Plan (SMP). Additionally, ensure all support staff and carers are trained in seizure first aid and administration of emergency medication as required by the individual.
- Ensuring that the person has regular visits from family/friends/carers. This is not only good for social engagement, but also provides an opportunity for risks to be regularly assessed by others.
- Support the person to complete a *Personal risk register* on the next page, which will assist in identifying strategies to manage risks.

- Support the person to complete an Epilepsy Wellbeing Map™ which will assist in identifying individual risks.

Epilepsy Wellbeing Map™



- Support the person to assess whether additional carer support or access to personal alerts or alarms would be of benefit during identified activities or times of the day (e.g., swimming, sleep).
- Ensure there is an observer or swimming companion trained in seizure first aid to support the person when swimming.

## Where to go for further information:

Epilepsy New Zealand <http://epilepsy.org.nz/>



**EPILEPSY NEW ZEALAND®**  
THE NATIONAL EPILEPSY ASSOCIATION OF NEW ZEALAND  
*kia titiro ki te tangata - see the person*

### **National Support Centre**

Epilepsy House, 6 Vialou Street, Hamilton  
Central, Hamilton 3204  
PO Box 1074, Hamilton 3240  
Phone: 07 834 3556  
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This information sheet is part of a suite of resources that are targeted to family members, carers and support workers, to assist with caring for people living with epilepsy and a cognitive disability.

The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from an appropriately qualified health professional.

## Personal risk register

Activity	Identified risk	Likelihood of risk happening	Impact should risk occur	Ways to minimise risk
Example: Swimming	A seizure may occur while swimming	High likelihood as seizures are uncontrolled and can happen during the day	Drowning, potentially fatal	Have a swimming companion, trained in first aid