

**epilepsy  
society**

# leisure

Living a full and active life



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When you see this symbol, it means further information is available.

## Call us for a large print version

This leaflet was reviewed by Professor Sanjay Sisodiya, Professor of Neurology at Epilepsy Society and The National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery. Epilepsy Society is grateful to other organisations who have given guidance on this leaflet.

## helpline

**01494 601 400**

Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm  
(national call rate)

# living a full and active life

To live full and active lives, and look after our physical and emotional wellbeing, we all need time to rest, relax and exercise. How we spend our leisure time is important and individual to us all, whether or not we have epilepsy.

This leaflet looks at some popular leisure activities, listed alphabetically, and suggests how they might be made safer for people with epilepsy. These are only suggestions, and any decisions about leisure activities need to be made on an individual basis.

## **Making choices about leisure activities**

Epilepsy is a very individual condition. How it affects you may be very different to how it affects someone else. Most people with epilepsy live full and active lives, and do the leisure activities that they want to.

Some people with epilepsy, especially if they still have seizures, may have concerns about the safety of some activities. If you have concerns, it may be helpful to consider:

- what your seizures are like;
- when they happen;
- whether you get any warning (know that a seizure is going to happen); and
- what would help make the activity safer for you.

This may help you to make decisions based on your individual situation and avoid unnecessary restrictions.

If you are making choices on behalf of someone else, such as a child or a person with learning disabilities, it is important to involve them in the decision as far as possible. This helps ensure that they are able to take part in the leisure activities they want to, and are not restricted by their epilepsy without good reason.

### **Looking at safety**

How epilepsy affects safety depends on you and your epilepsy. People who have seizures that are controlled with medication, may not need the same safety measures as those who still have seizures.

Some activities do not need to be changed to make them safer for people with epilepsy. For others, simple measures might make them safer. For example, having someone with you who knows how to help you if a seizure happens.

One way to think about safety is to do a risk assessment. This looks at what the possible risks are for anyone doing the activity, what it is about your epilepsy that may affect these risks, and what can be done to make the activity safer for you.



**See our website for more about risk assessments.**

## Equality Act 2010

Under the Equality Act 2010 people with a disability have important rights to use leisure facilities. Epilepsy is a physical, long-term condition and people with epilepsy are protected under the Equality Act even if their seizures are controlled or if they don't consider themselves to be 'disabled'. Leisure providers may need to make adjustments to make a service more user-friendly. If you have specific needs you may want to talk to the organisation to ask how they can help.



Visit [www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

## sports and leisure activities

### Abseiling, climbing and hill walking

Anyone who does abseiling, climbing or hill walking needs the right expert support and safety measures. It is important to assess the possible risks for *anyone* doing the activity, and then think about how *your* epilepsy may affect those risks.

Having an instructor who knows about your epilepsy means that they can help ensure your safety and the safety of other people with you.

### Alcohol

The decision to drink alcohol is a personal choice. How alcohol affects someone with epilepsy depends on the individual, if they are

taking anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) and how much alcohol they drink. For most people with epilepsy, the occasional alcoholic drink does not usually cause a problem. It is usually recommended that people with epilepsy have no more than 1-2 units of alcohol per day. The patient information leaflet that comes with your AEDs may have information about drinking alcohol with that particular medication. It may also be useful to consider the following:

- alcohol can make the side effects of AEDs worse;
- AEDs may increase the effects of alcohol;
- alcohol can trigger seizures for some people;
- some people may be more likely to have a seizure if they are hungover; and
- alcohol can disrupt sleep patterns, which can make seizures more likely.

### **Combat sports**

Boxing or martial art sports that involve blows to the head are not recommended for people with epilepsy due to the high risk of head injury.

### **Cycling**

All cyclists are advised to wear reflective clothing and a cycle helmet approved by British safety standards. If you have seizures, it may be safer to avoid cycling on busy roads and to cycle with someone who can help if you have a seizure.

## **DIY and gardening**

If you have seizures and would like to do your own home improvements, it may be helpful to think about the type and frequency of your seizures and the potential risks of each job.

Knowing your own abilities may help reduce the risk of accidents or injuries. If you are in doubt about doing a job yourself, or the risks involved, you may want to talk to a professional such as an electrician, plumber or gardener.



**See our leaflet *safety*.**

## **Extreme sports and adventure sports**

Activities like bungee jumping, hang gliding, snowboarding and whitewater rafting have high levels of excitement, skill and danger. They often involve speed, height and a high level of physical energy. It is a good idea to talk to your GP or specialist about what the risks are for you before trying a new sport or activity. Each sport's governing body can give you information on safety regulations, but they may advise you that the activity is too dangerous for you.

## **Flying a private plane**

If you have a history of seizures, whether you can fly a private plane depends on the type of licence you need. To fly with a Restricted National Private Pilot's Licence (no passengers) you must be seizure-free for one year. To fly with a National Private Pilot's Licence

(with passengers) you must be seizure-free and off anti-epileptic drugs for 10 years.



**Contact the Civil Aviation Authority on 01293 573 700 or visit [www.caa.co.uk](http://www.caa.co.uk)**

### **Go-karting and ATV quad biking**

In the UK, you do not need a driving licence to drive a go-kart or an ATV (all terrain vehicle) quad bike on private land.

The National Karting Association (NKA) recommends that you are seizure-free for one year before karting, and that karting venues ask people to declare any medical conditions that could affect their driving. Some venues may have their own policy on whether people who have seizures are allowed to drive on their circuits.

The British Off-Road Driving Association (BORDA) does not have specific guidelines on quad bikes but most ATV venues would expect you to sign a form to accept your own liability if you have an accident.

It is recommended that anyone karting or quad biking always wears a crash helmet.

### **Horse riding**

It is recommended that everyone wears an approved British Horse Society (BHS) riding hat for horse riding.

If you have seizures it is also recommended that you ride with someone who knows what to do if you have a seizure.

Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) has local groups around the UK and can offer special facilities for people with disabilities.



**See page 19 for contact details.**

## **Recreational drugs**

Recreational drugs have particular risks for people with epilepsy. Amphetamines (speed), cocaine, ecstasy and heroin have all been shown to increase the frequency of seizures.

Taking cannabis is also not advised if you have epilepsy. Some reports claim cannabis is not harmful, however other research has shown it can lead to an increase in seizures. This may be partly because cannabis can be made up of different compounds, and so the effects on the brain can vary. Further research is being looked at into the effects of using cannabis for people with epilepsy.

For some people, using recreational drugs could cause epilepsy to start and may increase the risk of triggering mental health problems.



**Visit [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) for more about drugs.**

## **Sex and relationships**

Some people with epilepsy have problems with sex or relationships. Problems such as a low sex drive can happen for a number of

different reasons: anxiety, depression, and the side effects of some AEDs can all contribute. Relationships can also be affected by how you or your partner feels about epilepsy.

Talking to your partner and a doctor can help to find the right support and treatment. For example, a doctor may suggest a review of your medication or identify where counselling might be helpful.

### **Skiing and snowboarding**

Snowsport England (the governing body for English snowsports) believes that snowsports should be open to everyone, whether or not they have a disability.

It can be useful to think what the risk to your safety might be if you were to have a seizure on the slopes or ski lift. It may be safer to ski with someone who knows how to help you if you have a seizure.

### **Team sports**

Playing team sports such as football or rugby do not necessarily need extra safety measures for someone with epilepsy. However, with any sport that involves contact with other people, there may be a risk of head injuries, which could affect your epilepsy.

It's a good idea if someone on the team or a coach knows about your epilepsy, and how they can help you if you have a seizure.



## Television and computer games

Epileptic seizures can sometimes be triggered by certain speeds of flashing or flickering lights, and by some geometric patterns. This is called photosensitive epilepsy and it affects up to 5% of people with epilepsy. For someone with photosensitive epilepsy, triggers can include:

- playing video games;
- looking at moving computer graphics;
- watching a faulty television or other light source that flickers slowly; and
- strobe lights.

The common rate for a flashing light to trigger seizures is between 3 and 30 hertz (flashes per second).

It is a good idea for everyone to take regular breaks when watching TV or using a computer, and to watch TV from a distance in a well-lit room.

TV programmes, films and theatre performances often have a warning if they have flashing lights or images. Video and computer games that have fast moving or flickering images may carry a warning on the packaging. Strobe lighting may be used in nightclubs too.

If you are suddenly exposed to a trigger, covering one eye completely with your hand may help reduce the photosensitive effect.



**See our factsheet *photosensitive epilepsy*.**

## Theme parks

Many people with epilepsy can go on rides depending on how their epilepsy affects them. For some people with epilepsy, excitement or stress due to the rides, noise or crowds could trigger a seizure. Theme parks need to let people know if anything during a ride could make a medical or physical condition worse.

## Yoga

Yoga can have a number of benefits including improving your fitness. The deep breathing involved in many forms of yoga aims to be relaxing. Some forms of yoga involve extreme breathing techniques and may need extra care.



[See our complementary therapies factsheet.](#)

## water sports

Many water sports can be made safer for people with epilepsy by taking the right safety measures. This means considering what risk the activity involves as well as how your epilepsy affects you. For example, there may be different risks for water-skiing than for dinghy sailing if you have seizures where you lose consciousness.

Wearing a lifejacket is recommended for most water sports. It is also important to have someone with you who knows how to help if you have a seizure. This could be a friend or an instructor.

## **Kayaking and canoeing**

The Institute of Sport and Recreation Management says that there can be risks for people with epilepsy who paddle a kayak (sometimes called a canoe). If a kayak overturns when someone has a seizure they could be trapped underneath, and their buoyancy aid could keep them pressed up under the kayak. Although this is a risk for anyone who tips over a kayak, it is more of a risk for someone having a seizure as they may be unconscious or partly conscious at the time.

There is less risk of being trapped underneath an open canoe (sometimes called a Canadian canoe) during a seizure.

## **Scuba diving**

Scuba diving carries risks for anyone. Risks can include drowning, as well as conditions caused by breathing various levels of oxygen or nitrogen at depth.

Scuba diving is not recommended for people who have seizures because of the risk of having a seizure underwater. Having a seizure underwater can be life-threatening, and may also endanger the life of the diving buddy or other companions.

Once somebody has well-controlled seizures on medication the risk of further seizures is reduced, but is never removed completely. There may also be other risks associated with diving if you take AEDs, but there has been little research to investigate these.

The British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC) currently says that people must be seizure-free for five years (or three years if seizures only happen in their sleep), and off AEDs for five years, before they consider scuba diving.



**See page 18 for contact details.**

## **Swimming**

If you have seizures, it is a good idea to swim with someone who knows about the type of seizures you have, and how to help you if you have a seizure in the water.

Swimming in the sea, a river, or other open water is more risky than in a swimming pool because of currents, tides, sudden changes in depth, and colder water temperatures, even in summer. If you have a seizure in open water, it may also be harder for someone to see that you are having a seizure, or to be able to help you.

At a swimming pool, you could tell the lifeguards how they can help you if you have a seizure. Some people swim during quieter swimming sessions so it is easier for the lifeguards to see them.

If you have a seizure in the water, lifeguards or a friend can help you by supporting your head above the water, and gently towing you to a depth where they can stand up, or to the poolside. They can then support you in the water until the seizure stops. If you are near the poolside, they may need to protect you from hitting the side and injuring yourself.

You may need medical attention to check that you have not inhaled water during the seizure, even if you feel fine. It is also important for someone to stay with you afterwards and check that your breathing has returned to normal.

## travel and holidays

### Organised holidays

The organisation Phab runs holiday schemes around the UK, which bring people with and without disabilities together.

The Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR) produce holiday guides that give details about accessibility and facilities for people with disabilities.



**See page 19 for contact details.**

### Travelling by air

Having epilepsy does not usually prevent people from being able to travel by air. However, some people's seizures are triggered by being very tired (which could happen because of long journeys or 'jet lag'). Seizures can also be triggered by excitement or anxiety, which can affect some people when they are flying. If there is a chance that you might have a seizure on the plane, it is useful for someone travelling with you to know about your epilepsy and how to help if you have a seizure. Telling the airline about your epilepsy when you book means that they can let the cabin crew know about your seizures, and can tell them anything

about your epilepsy that you think may be important for them to know.

It is a good idea to take enough medication with you for your entire holiday. Some drugs may not be available or may have a different name in other countries. Your GP or the drug company may be able to tell you more about this.

Airport security regulations allow you to carry tablets, capsules or liquids up to 100ml in your hand luggage in case your main luggage is lost. If your medicine is in a container larger than 100ml you will need to contact the airline before you fly. You may need to have a letter from your GP or specialist explaining about your epilepsy and the medication you take.

If you are travelling to a different time zone you may want to gradually adjust when you take your medication, so that you can take it at an appropriate time of the day.


### **Travel insurance**

Travel insurance companies look at each individual's circumstances before giving a quote. Having epilepsy may mean that there is an increase in the premium you pay but this will depend on the type, frequency and severity of your seizures. Giving as much information as possible about your epilepsy may help the insurance company to give you an accurate and fair quote.

As with taking out any insurance policy, it is worth contacting a number of companies to get the best quote for your situation.

 **Call our helpline about travel insurance (see back page for contact details).**

Most UK residents are entitled to free or reduced cost emergency medical treatment during short visits to other European Union countries (plus Iceland, Lichtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). You will need a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC). An EHIC card does not replace the need for health insurance.

 **Application forms are available from the Post Office, or online at [www.ehic.org.uk](http://www.ehic.org.uk)**

### **Travel vaccinations**

Travel vaccinations can protect against infectious diseases when visiting some countries. Most vaccines will not affect a person's epilepsy, seizure control, or anti-epileptic drugs. However some anti-malarial medication can provoke seizures and are not suitable for people with epilepsy. If you need to use anti-malarial medication, your GP can advise you which medication will suit you best.

 **Call our helpline for more about anti-malarial medication.**

The Hospital for Tropical Diseases' Travel Healthline gives recorded information about anti-malarial treatments.

 **See page 19 for contact details.**

The Department of Health also has general travel advice and useful travel links.

 **Visit [www.dh.gov.uk](http://www.dh.gov.uk)**

## further information

### **Epilepsy Society information**

Complementary therapies  
Photosensitive epilepsy  
Safety

## other organisations

### **Break**

01263 822 161

**[www.break-charity.org](http://www.break-charity.org)**

Provides holidays and respite care for people with special needs and their families.

### **British Sub-Aqua Club (BSAC)**

0151 350 6200

**[www.bsac.com](http://www.bsac.com)**

Information on underwater sports and safety standards.

### **Frank**

Helpline 0800 776 600

**[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)**

Confidential helpline providing information and counselling about drugs.

### **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

Helplines: 0845 604 6610 (England)

0845 604 5510 (Scotland)

0845 604 8810 (Wales)

**[www.equalityhumanrights.com](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com)**

Information on the Equality Act 2010.



## **Hospital for Tropical Diseases**

0207 950 7799 (calls cost 50p per minute, charges from mobile phones may be higher).

**[www.thehtd.org](http://www.thehtd.org)**

Recorded information about anti-malarial treatment and other travel health advice.

## **Phab**

0208 667 9443

**[www.phabengland.org.uk](http://www.phabengland.org.uk)**

Runs holidays and activities for people with or without a disability.

## **Riding for the Disabled Association**

0845 658 1082

**[www.rda.org.uk](http://www.rda.org.uk)**

Offers horse riding facilities for people with disabilities.

## **Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation (RADAR)**

0207 250 3222

**[www.radar.org.uk](http://www.radar.org.uk)**

Provides a list of holiday schemes for people with disabilities.

Every effort is made to ensure that all information is correct. Please note that information may change after printing. This information is not a substitute for advice from your own doctors. Epilepsy Society is not responsible for any actions taken as a result of using this information.

## cares

A full life for everyone affected by epilepsy.

## informs

Website, leaflets, dvds – call 01494 601 392.

## researches

Pioneering medical research.

## campaigns

Shaping the future of epilepsy.

## connects



Forum, Facebook, Twitter and app.

Volunteer, become a member, fundraise.

## educates

Awareness, schools, training for professionals.

## understands

Medical and care services.

## listens

### helpline 01494 601 400

Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm

Confidential. National call rate.

Information and emotional support.

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