

Generally, having a learning disability does not cause epilepsy, and having epilepsy does not cause learning disabilities. However, some people may have both epilepsy and learning disabilities if both are caused by the same underlying problem in the way their brain works.

What is a learning disability?

A learning disability is something that affects a person's ability to learn new skills and information. It can also affect communication, and the ability to live independently. The level and effect of learning disabilities will vary from one person to another. Some people with learning disabilities need support, while others are able to live more independent lives.

The causes of learning disabilities can vary but they generally happen either before birth or in childhood (before 18 years of age). Some learning disabilities are related to genetic conditions, such as Down's syndrome, or are caused by a problem in the way the brain develops before birth. Brain damage occurring at birth or from infections in early childhood can also cause a learning disability.

How often do epilepsy and learning disability happen together?

Epilepsy is more common in people with a learning disability than in the general population. About 30% of people (nearly 1 in 3) who have a mild to moderate learning disability also have epilepsy. The more severe the learning disability, the more likely it is that a person will also have epilepsy.

Around 20% of people (1 in 5) with epilepsy also have a learning disability.

Are seizures different in people with a learning disability?

There are many types of epileptic seizure and for anybody with epilepsy, they can affect awareness, feelings, movement or behaviour.

For example, complex partial seizures can include automatisms (repetitive movements without purpose) such as lip smacking or fiddling with clothing. Confusion can also be part of a seizure, and many people have periods of confusion after a seizure.

Because unusual behaviour, appearing confused, or difficulty in communicating can be part of having a learning disability, seizures may sometimes be hard to tell apart from behaviour due to a learning disability.

What happens to someone with a learning disability during a seizure will not necessarily be any different from what happens to someone who does not have a learning disability. However, for some people with a learning disability, their seizures may be different in any of the following ways:

- their seizures may be more frequent;
- their seizures may go on for longer;
- their seizures may be too complex to put into a typical seizure 'category';
- they might have more than one type of seizure, and could have one type of seizure closely following another; or
- their seizures may include subtle movements or behaviours that can be difficult to recognise as a seizure, sometimes described as 'atypical'.

When someone has unusual movements or behaviour, it can be helpful to film it, or write down details about what happens, if the person agrees that you can do this. This may help to see whether or not this is a seizure.

→ See NSE leaflets 'epilepsy – seizures' and 'epilepsy – diagnosis' for more information.

How is epilepsy treated in people with learning disabilities?

Treatment of epilepsy usually involves taking anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) to prevent seizures from happening. Controlling seizures with AEDs can be more difficult in people with learning disabilities. Seizures may also be more severe or more frequent. In both cases, this may be due to the underlying cause or brain damage. Understanding their own epilepsy, and how to manage the treatment for it, is important for everyone taking AEDs. For some people with learning disabilities, it can be difficult to understand exactly how and why they need to take their AEDs. They may need help with understanding this from relatives, carers or the health professionals involved in their care.

For people whose seizures are not controlled by medication, there may be other treatment options to reduce seizures, including brain surgery. There are many things that are taken into account when someone is considered for surgery. The possible benefits and the risks for each individual need to be considered, and each case is looked at individually.

→ See *Further reading for details of NSE information on medication and surgery.*

Can AEDs cause side effects or changes in behaviour?

As with all medications, drugs for epilepsy can cause side effects in some people. Some people with learning disabilities are more likely to have side effects. This may be because their brain has areas of damage that are more vulnerable to side effects of drugs.

Side effects can include feeling drowsy or sick, problems with vision or changes in behaviour. Some people have poor attention, feel restless, or have slow or unsteady movement. A person's mood can also be affected by AEDs in some cases.

Side effects can be difficult to tell apart from behaviour related to a learning disability. Also, if someone is not able to express what they are feeling, they may be withdrawn, or show aggression or other challenging behaviour, which could be mistaken for a side effect of their AEDs.

Can epilepsy impair 'cognitive functioning'?

Cognitive functioning is the process of knowing, thinking and learning. For people with learning disabilities and epilepsy, difficulties with this process are usually due to the underlying cause rather than due to epilepsy itself. If a person has stopped having seizures, and their drug plan can be kept simple, there may be less risk of their cognitive functioning being affected.

Further Reading

NSE leaflets / factsheets

epilepsy - seizures

epilepsy - diagnosis

epilepsy - medication for adults

epilepsy - medication for children

epilepsy - surgery

About epilepsy - NSE's information pack designed for adults with mild to moderate learning disabilities. Contains leaflets about epilepsy, using words, symbols and photos.

See *'NSE information' leaflet for details of all NSE information resources.*

To become an associate member call 01494 601 402 or email members@epilepsysociety.org.uk
For a fundraising pack call 01494 601 300 or email fundraising@epilepsysociety.org.uk

Epilepsy Information Services National Society for Epilepsy

Chesham Lane, Chalfont St. Peter, Bucks SL9 0RJ
www.epilepsysociety.org.uk

Epilepsy Helpline

01494 601 400 (national call rate)
Monday - Friday 10am - 4pm
(Translation service available)

