University can be an exciting time offering many opportunities both socially and academically and it is a time when you can build your independence.

Whatever your hopes and expectations, making epilepsy just a part of your life may help you to get the most out of your experience at university. Thinking and planning ahead can make the transition to university life smoother, giving you more time to get excited about what’s ahead.

Living arrangements
When you go to university, choosing where you want to live is an important decision, and there may be a range of options. You may choose to live at home or to move into student accommodation: student halls of residence, or a shared house or flat. Or you may live on your own. It is often worth thinking about what sort of accommodation would suit you best, as well as what you would like:

- Could you live in student halls of residence where there will be a warden available at all times should you need it? Can you stay in halls of residence for your entire course or will you have to move out after the first year?
- Do you need any particular equipment or adaptations to make your living environment safer? For example, an alarm or a shower rather than a bath, or a microwave rather than an oven?
- Do you need help during or after a seizure? If so, who might be able to help you and how will you call for help?

It may be a good idea to get in touch with the university accommodation office as soon as possible to talk through what options are available, what your needs are and how they can best help you.

Who should you tell?
Perhaps you have already thought about who you want to tell about your epilepsy. Or you may feel that you don’t want to tell anyone. If your seizures are controlled, you may feel that there is no need. The choice is yours, but you might want to think about the following points:

- If you need any support or help, for example from your lecturers or the student disability service, you will need to tell them that you have epilepsy.
- If you need financial help, such as Disabled Students’ Allowance, you will need to disclose that you have epilepsy in order to qualify. This also applies to other sources of financial help, such as the Disabled Persons Railcard or other discounted travel.
- If you have seizures, it might be useful for people to know about your epilepsy so that they know what to look out for, and how to help you.
- You might just want to tell the people you spend most time with, who you live with, your classmates, or your tutor.

It may not feel easy to tell someone that you have epilepsy. How do you bring the subject up? When do you tell them? You might have had good or bad experiences of telling people in the past, which can affect how confident you feel. Planning what you want to say might make you feel more confident and comfortable. You can then tell them how and when you want to on your own terms, or not at all. It is your choice.
You may want to download our free app, and use that to explain about your epilepsy. Or you can call us for some first aid cards that you could give out to people, or visit the first aid section of our website to show them how they can help you if you have a seizure.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/digitalmedia
Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/first-aid-epileptic-seizures

Leisure and sport

Going out and having fun is important to us all and, at university, there are plenty of opportunities to do so. So does your epilepsy have to get in the way? As epilepsy varies from one person to another, what is right for one person may not be right for another. If you know that your epilepsy affects you in a particular way, you can make your own decisions about what you can do. For example, if your epilepsy makes you very tired, early morning activities might not be for you. If you have seizures without a warning, doing activities with someone who knows about your epilepsy, might make it safer.

What sports can I do?

Most people with epilepsy can take part in most sports, but it does depend on how your epilepsy affects you. Playing team sports that involve other people, like football, can carry a risk of head injury if you collide with someone. Sport and leisure activities in and around water, or done at heights, may be risky if you have seizures. Simple safety measures can reduce the risks in most cases.

Be realistic about what you want to do, what the possible risks could be for you, and how you can reduce those risks. For example, have a friend with you who knows what to do if you have a seizure. Telling other people about your epilepsy, like your team coach or a lifeguard at the pool, means they can help you if you have a seizure. Having epilepsy doesn’t have to stop you trying new things or doing what you enjoy.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/sport-and-leisure

TV and computer games

For most people with epilepsy, watching TV and playing computer games won’t cause any problems at all. However, a small percentage (about 3%) of people with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy. This is when seizures are triggered by flashing or flickering lights, or by seeing moving patterns like stripes or checks. Flatscreen computers and TVs either do not flicker at all or have a flicker rate that is too fast to cause a problem. But, if you do have photosensitive epilepsy, flashing images, lights or patterns on the computer game itself could trigger seizures. This depends on what the images are, how close you are to the screen and how dark the room is. Computer games that have flashing images may carry a warning on the packaging.

Theme parks, festivals or gigs?

Rides at theme parks, noise, loud music, crowds and late nights can be exciting or raise stress levels, or can be tiring. For some people, these situations may trigger a seizure and for other people they won’t. Learning if your epilepsy has any triggers like these can help you make decisions about what you do.

Making the most of Freshers’ Week

Freshers’ Week can be an exciting time with lots of activities and events that give you the opportunity to meet new people, make friends and try out new activities. You can also sign up for groups and courses that run through the term. But, for some people, it may also feel overwhelming and hectic, with lots going on and crowds of people, and feeling the need to ‘fit in’. Remember, if you feel this way, that many people will be feeling the same way as you, whether or not they have epilepsy.

Alcohol and drugs

Although students are sometimes seen as drinking too much and taking drugs, this isn’t student life for everyone. But it may be worth thinking about how you might handle conversations, and opportunities, around alcohol and drugs. Having a good time when you go out is important. But for some people a party lifestyle can make seizures more likely, if their seizures can be triggered by being tired from late nights, alcohol or drugs.

Drinking alcohol is a personal choice and the effect of alcohol varies from one person to another. Some people find that they are ok to drink, others find that it guarantees a seizure the next day.
It might be useful to find out how many units of alcohol you are drinking and what your limits are. You can check the label to see the strength of what you are drinking. It is usually recommended that people with epilepsy have no more than 1-2 units per day, for the following reasons:

- Drinking alcohol can trigger seizures, often during a hangover (when your brain is dehydrated).
- Being sick could affect the level of anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs) in your system, which may affect how well your seizures are controlled.
- Alcohol can disrupt your sleep, which can make seizures more likely if tiredness is a trigger for you.
- Alcohol does not mix well with some AEDs and can make some side effects worse.

The information leaflet that comes with your medication will normally say if it is best to avoid alcohol.

Not every student is waiting to be offered drugs. But you may be thinking about what you want to do if you are offered them, or you may have already decided what you will do. Whether you take drugs or not is your personal choice but it might be worth knowing that cannabis, ecstasy, speed, cocaine and other drugs can all increase the chance of having a seizure.

Visit talktofrank.com

Sex and relationships
Many young people worry about sex and relationships, whether they have epilepsy or not. Getting close to someone else can be great, but it may also leave you feeling vulnerable. If you have epilepsy, you might also be thinking about when to tell your partner and how it will affect your relationship, if at all.

You might be worried about having a seizure during sex. While this is possible, it is probably no more likely than having a seizure at any other time.

Planning contraception and safe sex is important to protect you and your partner against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For girls and young women with epilepsy, there are particular issues around contraception that can affect both seizures and the effectiveness of contraception, as some methods of contraception affect and are affected by anti-epileptic drugs.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/contraception-and-epilepsy

Risk and safety
Life for people with epilepsy can be a balance between managing the condition and doing the things that they want to. Having epilepsy can bring risks, and there are safety issues to consider. But it is also important to keep any potential risks in perspective and to avoid making generalisations about what you 'can’t do' just because you have epilepsy. The key to looking at safety issues and managing risks is to think about:

- What is the activity or situation?
- What are the risks associated with this activity or situation for anyone?
- What is it about your epilepsy or seizures that put you at more risk than other people?
- How can these risks be reduced?

For example, riding a bike on a busy road can be risky for any cyclist. For someone with well-controlled epilepsy who doesn’t have seizures, the risk may be no greater. But for someone who has seizures without warning, the risk of injury probably is greater. Cycling on quieter roads or with another person, may help to reduce the risk of injury if a seizure happens.

How serious can the risks be?
For most people with epilepsy, seizures last a few seconds or minutes and then they recover and can carry on with normal life. For some people, there are complications with seizures that can have serious consequences. Although this is a difficult topic to read about, it might be helpful to know about it so that you can make informed decisions about managing your epilepsy and the risks around it.
Status epilepticus or ‘status’ and SUDEP

Usually seizures stop by themselves. When a seizure goes on for a long time without stopping, or repeated seizures happen without the person recovering in between, and this goes on for 5 minutes or more, the person is in ‘status’. If status happens in a tonic clonic seizure (when the person is unconscious and shakes), an ambulance needs to be called. Emergency medication may need to be given to stop the seizure.

Although it is very rare, it is possible to die as a result of a seizure. Sometimes this happens due to sudden unexpected death in epilepsy or ‘SUDEP’. SUDEP is when a person with epilepsy dies suddenly and where no other cause of death is found. It is hard to be sure why SUDEP happens, but it may be that during a seizure the person’s breathing or heartbeat are affected.

You may choose to wear an alarm to alert someone if you have a seizure. Getting the best seizure control possible is often the best way to reduce risks around epilepsy and seizures.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/your-wellbeing-and-epilepsy

Living life to the full

Trying to find ways to make epilepsy just part of your life might help you to make the most of going to university. The key to achieving a fuller life might be in taking care of yourself, taking control of your epilepsy, planning ahead and making the most of what help and support is available.

There are a number of websites that offer information and support.

ucas.com/undergraduate/applying-university/individual-needs/disabled-students
nus.org.uk
studentastic.co.uk
thestudentroom.co.uk
studential.com

If you would like to talk to someone about anything you have read here, you can call our epilepsy helpline on the number below.