

Epilepsy in the Home:

Everyone faces potential hazards in the home. Accidents can be caused by unguarded fires, badly wired plugs, carelessness with chip pans etc. Good safety procedures are important for everybody.

For the person with epilepsy additional risks may exist. Those whose seizures are well controlled may need to take a few extra precautions. People whose attacks continue to be frequent and unpredictable will need to exercise particular care, especially if there is likely to be a sudden loss of unconsciousness with little or no warning.

1. Make sure everyone in the family knows what to expect when you have a seizure, knows correct seizure first aid and knows when it is (or isn't) necessary to call for emergency to call for emergency help.
2. Know first aid for choking. Make sure your family and friends do, too.
3. Help young children in your family learn what to do by having "seizure drills" that review first aid steps and how to call for help.
4. Wear a medical identification bracelet or necklace.
5. Avoid things which are known to increase the risk of a seizure- for example, forgetting to take medication; not getting enough sleep; drinking a lot of alcohol; or using illegal drugs.
6. Try using a pillbox to help you remember your medicines. Store all medicines safely away from children.
7. If you have aura (warning) before a seizure, lie down on your side on a carpeted or other soft surface.
8. Carry a small portable phone or beeper in case you have to call for help and cannot get to a regular phone.
9. If your seizures are frequent and sudden, consider wearing a helmet or other protective clothing, such as knee or elbow pads, at least when you're home alone.

PLAY IT SAFE: CONSIDER THESE SAFETY MEASURES

Bathroom/Toilet Doors: If possible, it is wise to hang the door so that it opens outwards; then the door would not be blocked if a person fell behind it. Locks are better avoided, so that help can be quickly at hand if required. Some families use special safety locks that can be operated from outside in an emergency. Others find that a "cardboard engaged" notice hung over the outside door handle is all that is needed.

Front/Back Doors: If a parent has epilepsy, it is important to ensure that a young child cannot open doors and wander outside.

Pillows: Soft pillows can be dangerous if seizures occur at night, and some people with epilepsy choose to sleep without one. Others use special safety pillows.

Television: A small proportion of people with epilepsy are photosensitive: their seizures may be triggered off by flashing or flickering lights. Such people need to take special care when watching television. The set is best played at eye level, at least 3 metres away from the viewer, with a small illuminated lamp on top. Use a remote control to change channels where possible and avoid looking at the lit screen with both eyes from a short distance.

Stairs: Stair gates at both the top and bottom of stairs may be useful in preventing accidents.

Garden: If a partner has epilepsy and there are young children in the family, it is important to make sure that the children cannot wander off unsupervised should a seizure occur. Garden gates need effective locks.

The advisability of using steps and ladders should be assessed on an individual basis.

Heaters: Light-weight, free-standing heaters are better avoided. Radiator guards may also be necessary. Smokers should consider the fire hazards of smoking whilst in an armchair or in bed or at any time on one's own.

Electrical gadgets: Trailing electrical flexes are dangerous, as they can result in an appliance being pulled over during a seizure, which could cause a fire. Cooker and kettle guards, cordless kettles and irons are available and may help prevent accidents. All electrical gadgets and power tools should always be used with great caution and with a circuit breaker.

Kitchen Safety: Avoid carrying dishes of hot food or liquid about. Take the plates to the saucepan when dishing up, not the saucepan to the plates. If cooking for a small number of people, use several small dishes instead of one large one to minimize the risk attached to lifting a large dish of hot food from the oven.

Furniture: The risk of injury from falling against furniture during a seizure can be reduced by fitting shaped plastic pieces (available from ironmongers) over sharp corners of furniture.

Glass doors: Toughened glass is available for doors, low windows, etc and can greatly reduce the risk of injury if a seizure occurs nearby. Alternatively, rolls of safety film can be purchased and applied to glass surfaces to prevent dangerous splintering in the event of impact.

Baths: Water is always a potential hazard, and extra care needs to be taken when bathing. Keep the depth of water in the bath just a few inches, and do not use very hot water. DO NOT get into the bath until the tap has been turned off. A shower can be a good alternative to a bath, although it is not entirely risk-free. To avoid the possibility of scalding if a seizure occurs, ensure that the water temperature control is effective, and never use very hot water. Avoid a shower with a high lip where the water could be

trapped if a fall resulted in a blocked exit pipe. Ideally a shower fitting could be attached to bath taps and a shower taken sitting down in the bath without the plug in. If your seizures are frequent and unpredictable, let someone know when you are taking a bath or shower.

Medication: Remember that medication is a potential hazard for small children. Pills and tablets are easily mistaken for sweets, and the child who has watched a parent take medication may attempt to follow suit. Anti-epileptic and other drugs should be securely locked away. Be safety conscious about pills carried around in pockets and bags, if there is an inquisitive toddler about.

KEEP SAFETY IN PERSPECTIVE

Sometimes a diagnosis of epilepsy leads to over-reaction in the family, so that the person with epilepsy becomes hedged around with unnecessary restrictions. Remember that we all take risks in our daily life and that the person with epilepsy is no different. Extra caution may be only necessary at certain times eg. when feeling unwell, and paying attention to 'warnings' when they occur can help to minimize dangers. Relatives should remember that over-protection can undermine self-confidence. It is most important that people with epilepsy are encouraged to lead as full and active a life as possible. Not only will this give them a better quality of life but will also have a beneficial effect on their epilepsy: Safety precautions should be sensible, and relevant to the particular case of epilepsy involved.