

Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

Editor's Note: Content presented in the Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog is for awareness and informational purposes only, and it is not meant to be a diagnostic tool.

In this week's blog, I write about exercise and epilepsy. **HOWEVER, BEFORE I BEGIN, I WANT TO REMIND EVERYBODY THAT IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONSULT WITH THE APPROPRIATE MEDICAL PROFESSIONALS PRIOR TO STARTING ANY TYPE OF EXERCISE PROGRAM. GETTING OVERHEATED MAY TRIGGER A SEIZURE.**

Many people with epilepsy, especially those with uncontrolled seizures, live a sedentary life and have low physical fitness. Research in the USA has shown that people with epilepsy exercise less than those without epilepsy. Clinical and experimental studies have analyzed the effect of physical exercise on epilepsy. The result? Exercise can be beneficial. Regular physical exercise may have a moderate seizure preventive effect in 30-40% of the patient population, while in about 10%, strenuous exercise may provoke seizures.

Although there are rare cases of exercise-induced seizures, studies have shown that physical activity can decrease seizure frequency, as well as lead to improved cardiovascular and psychological health in people with epilepsy.

Exercise, especially aerobic exercise, clearly benefits people with epilepsy because it often reduces seizure frequency, relieves depression, reduces social isolation, and promotes cardiac and general health.

Exercise improves fitness, energy and mood and relieves stress. Improving overall health and wellbeing in this way can help reduce seizures and the impact of epilepsy for some people. It can also help people feel more in control of their health.

How can exercise help epilepsy?

Exercise helps people to stay fit and healthy. If your child has epilepsy, this may help them to reduce the number of seizures they have. Exercise can also improve mood and relieve stress. As stress is a common trigger for seizures, exercise may help to prevent seizures for some people.

There are many ways to be active, including some that people may not realize actually count. Exercise releases 'feel good' hormones into the brain, helps to keep your muscles active, reduces fat levels in the body, and increases oxygen flow to your brain. It can also increase your bone density which can help to prevent osteoporosis (where bones become fragile and are more likely to break). The NHS recommends exercise as one of the five steps to mental wellbeing. Being active may help you feel more positive and able to get the most from life.

Research in exercise and epilepsy

A study in Norway of women with uncontrolled epilepsy, showed that regular sessions of aerobic exercise (for example running, walking, swimming, cycling) for 60 minutes, twice a week, for 15 weeks, resulted in a significant reduction in the number of seizures they had. They also had fewer muscle pains, sleep problems and fatigue, and had lower cholesterol and better oxygen flow around the body.

Some specific diseases that are linked to a lack of exercise, poor diet and being overweight include cardiovascular disease (which can lead to heart attacks and strokes), type 2 diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), osteoporosis and certain cancers. A lack of exercise can also be linked to increases in depression and anxiety. Studies show that people with epilepsy are at an increased risk of developing most of these conditions, so being active and maintaining a healthy diet can help your overall health.

Can I do exercise if I am tired or ill?

You may not feel like doing exercise if you are tired due to seizures or because of the side effects of your medication. However, even gentle exercise can actually boost energy levels.

Some people with epilepsy may worry about doing in exercise in case they hurt themselves during a seizure. In fact, research shows that although seizures can happen during exercise, the positive effects of exercise may help to reduce seizures for some people with epilepsy.

Where do I start?

PRIOR TO STARTING ANY EXERCISE PROGRAM OR REGIMINE IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT A MEDICAL PROFESSIONAL BE CONSULTED. It can help to start with a short, regular session of activity that feels manageable and that becomes part of your daily routine. Some ideas to help you start and keep going with exercise include the following.

- Warm up
- Walk around the block or even around your house regularly, and gradually increase the distance.
- Do exercise to music that you enjoy.
- Drink water, diluted fruit juice or squash while you exercise, to help replace the fluids and body salts you lose.
- Do not exercise straight after a meal.
- Have a friend exercise with your child. Make it as fun as possible.
- Keep a diary of how your child feels after exercising.
- Give your child credit every time they exercise – it can take determination and self-discipline.

Warming up and stretching

The NHS gives advice on how to warm up before exercising, and how to stretch after exercising. Stretching can also help relieve stress because it releases tension from your muscles, making you feel more relaxed. Visit the NHS website to find stretching exercises. Fitness books and DVDs will also have guides on stretching.

What types of exercise can I do?

Exercise does not have to mean joining a gym or running in the park – walking is one of the easiest and safest exercises that most people can do. Gardening, or relaxing activities such as tai chi, are other great ways to exercise. The key is for your child to find the exercise that feels right for them. Visit www.nhs.uk/change4life for help on how to make small changes and get more active.

Understanding your own epilepsy can help you decide what exercise suits your child. This includes knowing what happens during their seizures, whether there is anything that triggers their seizures, and telling other people how they can help your child if they witness a seizure happening.

Walking with your child means you can help if your child has a seizure. If your child wants to walk alone, there are ways to help them feel safer. Be sure they walk using well-known routes, avoiding busy roads, and taking a cell phone with them. Some people with epilepsy choose to carry medical ID that tells other people how to help them if they have a seizure when out and about.

Swimming and other water sports can be great exercise and can be made safer for people with epilepsy by taking the right safety measures.

Team activities and contact sports

Team sports, or group activities such as walking or gardening groups, can also be a good way of increasing self-confidence, and can be a way to make new friends and help with any feelings of isolation.

Most sports, including contact sports like football, hockey, basketball, and rugby, have not shown to increase the chance of someone having a seizure, **but contact sports may come with an increased risk of head injuries, which could affect epilepsy for some people.** Protective sports headgear helps to reduce this risk, and there are team sports that are not likely to risk head injuries.

Telling your child's coach or someone on the team about your child's epilepsy and giving them first aid information means they can help if your child has a seizure. Remember that Epilepsy Alliance Ohio can provide seizure recognition and seizure first aid for your child's team.

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Editor's Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.
Always remember – CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!

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