

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.

This week we look at some important safety considerations at work for those who have epilepsy. It is estimated that 3.4 million Americans are living with epilepsy, but at least sixty-six percent of this number can manage their condition with medication. For those that do require medication, the likelihood of daily or weekly seizures can be rare, especially if they can avoid common triggers. Unfortunately, misconceptions surrounding the condition can lead to discrimination. It can be difficult for people with epilepsy to find gainful employment or hold down a job once they do. According to studies, only 30 percent of adults with epilepsy are in full-time employment while 17 percent are employed part-time.

Answering vital questions like “what is epilepsy” is the first step to understanding the disorder. Epilepsy is a disorder characterized by recurring, unprovoked seizures. All seizures are a result of excessive electrical discharges in a group of brain cells. About 10 percent (800 million) of people worldwide will experience a single isolated seizure, but only fifty million have epileptic seizures.

In the various epilepsy support websites and social media sites, one of the most frequently asked questions is, “Do I have to disclose that you have epilepsy to your employer?”

Unless there's a chance a person's epilepsy could interfere with their regular job duties, they are under no obligation to reveal their condition. The Epilepsy Society in your country can give you an idea of what jobs a person with epilepsy can and cannot do, but the “can't” list is very short.

Even though most people with epilepsy can perform well in nearly any job, they will likely withhold their epilepsy from employers. If a person with epilepsy reveals their condition at any point before or during employment, they could be considered “unfit” by employers and fired.

However, if a person chooses to voluntarily disclose their epilepsy, they should not be punished for it. Instead, employers should commit to making their workplace a safe environment for them.

What does an employer need to do to keep the worksite safe for people with epilepsy? There are many different types of epilepsy, and all employers can make reasonable adjustments to accommodate people with this condition. Here are some suggestions as to how employers can keep staff with epilepsy safe.

1. Understand the Nature of Their Condition

There are four different types of epilepsy: generalized, focal, combined, and unknown. Generalized epilepsy affects the left and right sides of the brain, and focal epilepsy affects only one part of the brain. Combined epilepsy is a mix of generalized and focal epilepsy but is extremely rare.

Unknown epilepsy means doctors do not know where seizures originate, but this condition is also very rare. Focal epilepsy is the most common of the four, followed by generalized epilepsy.

Any seizure type can interrupt motor function (body movements), what is classified as non-motor functions (i.e., staring into space) or both. A person with epilepsy will be familiar with how their condition presents. It is okay to ask if the person's condition requires medication, the frequency, type, and duration of seizures and if they experience warning signs before having a seizure.

With that said, the nature of their condition must be kept confidential. However, it is okay to ask if they can disclose their condition to other co-workers for the purpose of keeping them safe. If they are not comfortable doing this, do not do it for them. You will impact their ability to trust you. It is essential that employees trust their supervisors, so they can speak to them if they have a problem.

2. Identify Triggers and Work to Eliminate Them

Most epileptic seizures have a direct cause. Flickering lights are one of the most well-known triggers of epileptic seizures, which can be eliminated or reduced with flicker-free LED lights. With that said, you will also come across people with other triggers, such as light, temperature, stress, tiredness, and alcohol. If a person with epilepsy does experience a seizure, it is vital to know what they need before and after and if they can leave their desk before it happens.

It would be helpful if employers upgraded their workstation; include a wireless headset, padding around any hard surface, a fully padded chair, and an LED screen. Employers should consider implementing a buddy system, reducing the need for employees to access stairs, and placing the employee's desk close to the bathroom to insure privacy.

It is important to note that most people with epilepsy can manage their conditions themselves. They typically recover immediately after a seizure, but it can also take several minutes or hours for them to feel like themselves. For those having a seizure at work, they should be given a suitable place to rest while they are recovering. Businesses should also take into consideration how they will be able to leave the building in case of a fire or emergency and ask the employee if they will need assistance outside of the office or at the assembly point.

3. Reduce Stress in the Workplace

Stress causes or increases the severity of several illnesses, epilepsy included. For this reason, employers should work to reduce stress throughout their company, as they will eliminate burnout and increase productivity. It also will not make it look like one worker is offered special treatment.

Some of your employees will get angry and potentially ostracize employees with epilepsy if they are getting something they are not. While reprimanding employees for this behavior seems like a good idea, it may make things worse. Instead, offer the same benefits to all your employees.

There are two ways to reduce stress for employees with epilepsy: prior planning and support. For example, keeping a care package with pillows, blankets, medication, and a spare change of clothes under the employee's desk or in a personal locker can give them peace of mind.

Employers and co-workers can support people with epilepsy by being nonjudgmental. They will appreciate that you saw them as a person instead of a condition, and not everyone can do that.

Finally, you can reduce stress further by setting manageable targets and workloads. Do not allow solo work (unless requested), offer multiple breaks, and give them a consistent schedule, as it could interfere with their medication. Make sure someone on the floor knows how to do first aid.

At some point a person with epilepsy should provide their employers and supervisors with a seizure action plan. The seizure action plan will identify the seizures an employee has, the seizure first aid actions to be taken in case of a seizure, the medication taken to control their seizures, identify the conditions under which 911 should be called, and when to administer the employees seizure rescue medication.

Doug Simmons, Director of Advocacy at Epilepsy Alliance Ohio, can be a valuable resource for those with epilepsy in the workplace. Doug is very knowledgeable about the Americans with Disabilities Act.

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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