

Parents with epilepsy

The arrival of a new baby usually means a review of the normal safety procedures in your home. If you are a parent of a new baby and you have epilepsy you may need to take extra care. A few simple precautions can reduce the risk of accidents and prevent unnecessary anxiety for you as a new parent.

The kind of precautions you take will depend on your situation. You may need to consider:

- The type of seizures you have, how long they last, and how long it takes you to recover
- Any warnings, or patterns to your seizures
- Frequency of seizures
- Any other condition or disability which may affect your epilepsy
- Whether help is close at hand

A parent, who has frequent seizures without warning and loses consciousness, may need to take more care than a parent who rarely has seizures, or who has a reliable warning of a seizure coming on.

Getting some sleep

All new parents, particularly the breast feeding mother, will experience overwhelming tiredness for the first few months.

Sleep deprivation contributes to an increased chance of a seizure, so it is important that you try to catch up on rest whenever possible. Most babies wake during the night over the first few weeks. Sharing the responsibility with your partner or a helper will assist you to get as much sleep as possible, especially if your baby is wakeful between feeds.

During the day, try to sleep at the same time as the baby. To ensure you get uninterrupted rest, put a note on the front door, turn the phone volume down and if you have one, turn the answering machine on.

General Safety

When you take your new baby home, the maternal and child health nurse will be an excellent source of

advice on baby care and general safety procedures during childhood.

There are standard precautions which any parent with a baby or young child should think about, and these apply equally to the parent with epilepsy. A visit to the Child Safety Centre at the Royal Children's Hospital (ph: 07 36368111) may also give you many practical ideas.

Falls

A baby who is in a playpen or bouncinette on the floor will come to no harm if you have a seizure. You may have time to put your child in a safe place if you have a warning, but if seizures are frequent and unpredictable it is wise to have your child 'safe' in some way most of the time. A stair gate is a wise precaution in any home.

Remember that the more room a child has to explore, without risk of harm, the wider their horizons will become as they grow up. It is a matter of having a balance between safety and learning.

Burns and Scalds

Do not have a hot drink near you when feeding or cuddling your baby. With an active child around it may be safer to postpone tasks such as ironing until their nap, if this is at all possible. Alternatively, a gate at the kitchen entrance will ensure that a toddler cannot reach the oven or a hot stove if you are unconscious as the result of a seizure. Keep saucepan handles pointing inwards on the stove, or use a stove guard. Use back burners where possible. Ensure no electric leads are trailing around, and guard heaters and open fires. Covers for electric sockets are available from hardware shops. Ensure you choose garments with reduced fire risk.

Bathing

If you have seizures that involve loss of consciousness, it's a good idea to bath the baby only when someone else is at home. At other times you

may choose to sponge the child in its cot or on a waterproof sheet on the floor, with the basin of water well out of reach. Also be aware of containers of water that may be a danger such as a nappy bucket; these should also be well out of reach. Seizures may be more likely to occur when the mind is inactive or drowsy. Hot baths, which induce this state, may be a special hazard for you. Run cold water first, always turn off taps before you get in, avoid deep water and do not lock the door.

Carrying

If you are subject to frequent seizures, without warning and involving loss of consciousness, you may prefer to avoid carrying the baby in your arms if you are alone. You could attach wheels to a carry-cot and wheel the baby alongside you. Or if you know you've been missing out on sleep lately and are therefore more likely to have seizures, you may need to do less lifting and carrying of your child.

Feeding

Babies benefit from breast feeding, and the fact that you are taking anti-epileptic drugs is not usually a problem. Discuss what is best for you and your baby with your doctor or neurologist. Whether you are a mum breastfeeding or a dad bottle-feeding your baby, you can reduce the risk of dropping the child in the event of a seizure. Sit on the floor with your back to the wall and a cushion on either side so that the baby does not have far to fall if you lose consciousness. Most high chairs nowadays are adjustable and you might consider setting the chair at its lowest height, and sitting alongside on the floor while feeding an older baby.

Nappy Changing

This activity is best carried out on a waterproof mat on the floor. Avoid changing the baby on furniture such as a bed where the baby may roll and fall off if unattended. If safety pins are a concern, you may use disposable nappies with tape fasteners.

Medication

Whenever there is medication in the home, care must be taken to keep it out of reach of children. A cabinet with a child-proof lock is the best way of storing them. Also, be aware of taking your tablets in front of your child; they love to copy, they may want to imitate you.

Outside the home

When you take your baby out in the pram you may consider tying a length of cord from your waist or wrist so that the pram will not run away if you let go of the handle during a seizure. The cord should be long enough so that you do not pull the pram over when you fall. Reins will prevent a toddler from wandering off if you have a seizure in the street, but the child

should always carry identification in case of this eventuality.

However, even a very young child can learn to sit by your side until you recover. Be sure that your garden is well fenced, especially swimming pools, with a locked gate.

Explaining your Epilepsy

Your child will naturally be alarmed if a seizure occurs without any warning or explanation. The child may not understand what is happening, and secrecy will suggest that things are much worse than they actually are. It is therefore important that you start explaining your epilepsy to your child as early as possible, expanding on details as the child grows up. Children quickly learn how to be useful, preventing you from hurting yourself and taking care of any younger children during a seizure.

Relationships

Sometimes a new baby can put stress on the relationship which can be exaggerated if the couple feels anxious about the effect of epilepsy. Open discussion about each other's feelings can often this reduce stress and sometimes prevent it altogether. However, both parents should be sympathetic and understand each other's needs. A parent may feel "distanced" from their baby by the safety precautions they have to take whilst at home on their own and may need time when their partner is around to hold and cuddle their baby.

If you are a parent with epilepsy you will have been taking safety precautions at home before the new baby arrives. The extra care required to ensure that your child enjoys an accident-free home will only be an extension of your existing safety procedures. A new addition to your family should be a time of pleasure which should not be marred by unnecessary anxieties. If you have further concerns, contact your maternal and child health nurse or general practitioner or contact Epilepsy Queensland on the numbers below.

Although every effort has been made to ensure up to date and accurate information is provided, Epilepsy Queensland and its advisors cannot accept any liability in relation to the information provided. It is strongly recommended that you discuss any information with your doctor or other relevant organisation.

*This information sheet has been compiled by the Client Services Team at Epilepsy Queensland Inc.
For further information please contact the team on 1300 852 853 or 07 3435 5000*

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