

TEENAGERS AND EPILEPSY

Does puberty have anything to do with seizures?

Certain types of epilepsy are thought to be influenced by physical changes associated with puberty, such as juvenile myoclonic epilepsy and juvenile absence epilepsy, which typically develop before or around the time of puberty. Other types of epilepsy, such as childhood absence epilepsy and benign Rolandic epilepsy, are typically outgrown around the time of puberty.

Why am I asked not to drive?

Each state has laws restricting teenagers and adults from driving depending on how controlled their seizures are and when their last seizure occurred. Safety is most important when getting behind the wheel. Teens with epilepsy must abide by their state's laws when obtaining their driver's license and think about their own safety as well as the safety of others. Teens and adults with epilepsy cannot drive until they have not had a seizure for at least 6 months.

Can I be like other normal teenagers?

Teens with epilepsy are encouraged to be educated about their epilepsy, independent, and safe. Most go to school, have relationships, and drive. Teens with epilepsy are encouraged to seek out resources to aid them in living with seizures. One resource is the web site www.epilepsy.com which provides opportunity for teens to share their experiences with other teens living with epilepsy. Epilepsyfoundation.org also has a chat room for teens.

Will medications affect my studies?

All antiepileptic medications can have side effects and a common side effect is sedation. Cognitive difficulties have also been reported. Side effects may affect your ability to perform school work. You should work with your neurologist to select the most appropriate antiepileptic medication with the least potential for negative side effects.

Will my medications affect my appearance?

Most antiepileptic drugs do not affect your appearance but some medications may cause weight changes. Others have been known to cause hair loss or gum changes. You should ask your neurologist about the side effects associated with your antiepileptic medication.

Are there any antiepileptic drugs teenagers normally take?

There are no antiepileptic drugs just for teenagers. There are many anti-epileptic medications available and some are more appropriate for specific types of epilepsy. You should discuss anti-epileptic medication options specific to your type of epilepsy with your neurologist and any concerns you may have about what you are taking.

I hate being tired of the medications. Can anything help?

If you are experiencing sleepiness on your medications, you should talk to your neurologist. Adjustments in dosing or timing of dosing may help. It is also important you get adequate sleep.

Can I consider employment?

Yes. You should avoid working in situations in which you may be exposed to heavy machinery or could harm yourself should seizure activity occur while at work, such as working the deep fryer at a

fast food restaurant. If there is a chance you could have a seizure at work, it is best to tell your boss about your epilepsy, especially if a seizure could put you or someone else in danger.

Are there any sports which I have to avoid?

Participation in sports is encouraged. Most popular sports do not present any problems. However, rock climbing and horseback riding should be avoided since they place you at increased risk for injury should you have a seizure and fall. If your seizures are frequent, it is best to avoid contact sports such as football and hockey, since a seizure could place you at risk. However, if seizures are well controlled then the risk is low. You should wear a helmet when biking or skateboarding and swim only in the presence of a competent lifeguard.

Whom should I tell about my seizure? What should I say?

You should tell your close friends you have seizures, even if you have not had a seizure in some time. You should tell someone you are dating about your epilepsy when you feel most comfortable. If your seizures are frequent, it is better to tell earlier in your relationship than later in case seizure activity occurs unexpectedly.

How can I fight the ‘stigma’ against epilepsy?

Being honest and open about your epilepsy and educating others fights the stigma against epilepsy. Education is a powerful tool to reach others, teach them about seizures and eliminate fears and myths about epilepsy.

What if I have seizures in front of strangers?

Seizures can be unpredictable. Wearing an epilepsy bracelet may help others identify your history of seizures if you are not with people who know you. You should not feel embarrassed or isolated by having seizures. You can explain it as a “temporary electrical storm of the brain” and reassure them that you are otherwise just fine.

Can I drink alcohol or use other recreational drugs?

It is illegal to drink alcohol under age 21 or use recreational drugs and they can precipitate seizures. You may also fail to take your antiepileptic medications if you are intoxicated or your judgment is impaired by drug use. It is best to avoid alcohol and recreational drug use altogether.

Can I outgrow my seizures during my teenage years?

It depends on what kind of epilepsy you have. Some types are outgrown and some teens take medication into adulthood.

Will my epilepsy affect dating?

If you don't have seizures often, you may feel more comfortable not sharing your epilepsy right away with someone you are newly dating. Some teens fear their boyfriend or girlfriend will break up with them because of their epilepsy. Being honest and open about your epilepsy will help educate your significant other and minimize their fears.

Are there any parenting concerns for children with epilepsy?

Yes, parents of teens with epilepsy often struggle to allow their teen to be independent while wanting to protect them. Parents should encourage their teens to focus on activities they can do and remain connected with their peers to promote self-esteem. There is a “Toolkit for Parents of Teens with Epilepsy” and other resources that can be found at www.EpilepsyFoundation.org.

Can I get married and have children?

Yes, you can get married. You should always tell your neurologist if you are trying to get pregnant or are pregnant as some medications may affect your unborn baby.