



These practical tips may help you to better manage your seizures and gain more control of your life.



Medications

Antiepileptic medications do not cure epilepsy, but they can control seizures. Most people with epilepsy who take their medications as prescribed do not have seizures. Many people with epilepsy have memory problems to some degree, so to help you remember to take your medications every day, some practical tips are suggested below:

✓ Try to make it part of a daily routine like taking your dose at meal times.	✓ Place the medications in a safe, visible place as a reminder.
✓ Set a watch or small alarm clock as a reminder.	✓ Use a chart or calendar and tick when the dose is taken.
✓ Consider using a pillbox or ask the chemist to pack your medications into a pill pack. These usually have the day and time you are supposed to take the tablets.	✓ Ask someone close to remind you.

Other medications may interfere with antiepileptic medications or make you more prone to having seizures. Seek advice from your doctor before taking any new medications.

There are also many different **brands and generic medications** on the market for epilepsy and your pharmacist may offer you one of these as a cheaper alternative. Be aware that a generic product may not be exactly the same as the original brand.

While specific guidelines and tests are conducted to make sure the generic medications are the same, a slight degree of variation is allowed. Studies have shown that these slight variations can affect people with epilepsy. The slightest change can make the difference between a medication not working, a medication working well, or being too strong. Whether you are changing from brand to generic, generic to brand or generic to generic, this may cause seizures. So if your medication is working, continue with it - do not switch brands without discussing it with your neurologist or prescribing doctor. Generics sometimes have a different name, different packaging, different tablets, and are often slightly cheaper.

Be aware that *vomiting and diarrhea* (which may also be adverse effects of antiepileptic medications) can trigger seizures. This is because medications may not be absorbed properly and imbalances in the body's fluid and electrolytes can occur due to dehydration.

Complementary therapies and supplements

Some people with epilepsy have reported having seizures after taking herbal and homoeopathic medicines or supplements. Substances known to possibly increase seizure frequency include *Ginkgo Biloba*, *St John's Wort* and *Evening Primrose Oil*. Talk to your doctor before taking any of these substances or herbal medicines as these may interfere with the metabolism of antiepileptic medications.

Check with your doctor before taking other medications or supplements and always report adverse medication reactions to your doctor or pharmacist immediately.

Caffeine is a stimulant found in coffee, tea, chocolate and many soft drinks, some medications, including some diet pills, antihistamines and decongestants. Excessive amounts of caffeine can cause an increase in seizures. In addition, caffeine may interfere with antiepileptic medications.

Guarana is a natural caffeine source and a stimulant. It is a common ingredient in *high energy drinks* and herbal 'weight loss' teas and can combine with adrenaline to produce an even stronger stimulant effect.

Any substance that is considered a stimulant should be avoided or taken with care, as stimulants are more likely to increase the risk of seizures.

For greater seizure control, avoid large amounts of caffeine or switch to decaffeinated drinks.



There is much debate and controversy over the effects of *artificial sweeteners*. Opinions differ about their effects on health. Despite this, a number of people, including some with epilepsy, still think that the sweetener affects their health. The best test is to try eliminating it from your diet, keep a diary and see if your health, or epilepsy, improves.

Grapefruit and Seville oranges may impact seizure control. There are substances in grapefruit that can interfere with the way the body absorbs and breaks down certain medications, increasing or decreasing levels of the dose in the bloodstream. One of the medications affected is *Carbamazepine (Tegretol)*.

To minimise the risk of adverse effects caused by grapefruit:

- ◆ **DO NOT** drink grapefruit juice or eat grapefruit in any form if taking Carbamazepine (Tegretol, Tegretol CR or Teril) until you have talked with your doctor or pharmacist.
- ◆ Avoid taking any medication with grapefruit juice until you discuss with your doctor or pharmacist.
- ◆ Read the labels on foods and natural health products to make sure they do not contain grapefruit or Seville oranges.



Lifestyle

Triggers are events or circumstances that make people with epilepsy more likely to have a seizure. **Identifying known seizure triggers and trying to avoid them is important for gaining better control of seizures.** Avoiding seizure triggers can be difficult sometimes, so it is important to weigh up the risks and look at overall quality of life.

Common seizure triggers are; missed medications, fatigue, sleep deprivation and stress. Examples of some more individual triggers include:

- ◆ Flashing lights or changes in geometrical patterns (photosensitivity)
- ◆ Fever, colds or infections
- ◆ Extreme heat or cold
- ◆ Low blood sugar and poor nutrition
- ◆ Hormonal fluctuations in females
- ◆ Change in sleeping states
- ◆ Drug toxicity (too much antiepileptic medication or other medications)
- ◆ Medication interactions
- ◆ Anxiety
- ◆ Boredom
- ◆ Dehydration and over hydration
- ◆ Physical exhaustion
- ◆ Sudden shock or extreme pain
- ◆ Sudden loud noise

Sleeping

Lack of sleep is a common trigger for seizures. How much sleep each person needs is individual, but keeping to a regular bedtime and getting a full night's sleep (7-8 hours) as often as possible will be beneficial

People with epilepsy should not feel they need an excessive amount of sleep. Constant tiredness and sleepiness may be a sign that medications need adjusting. If you suffer from insomnia or overtiredness discuss the possible reasons with your doctor.

Drugs and alcohol

There are individual differences in the effect that alcohol has on seizures. Some people with epilepsy are more affected than others. Excessive alcohol intake is known to increase a person's likelihood of seizures. Recreational drugs can also cause seizures.

These are a few important points regarding drugs and alcohol:

1. Most people with epilepsy can enjoy a social drink, however some medications used in seizure management do not mix well with alcohol. Always check with your doctor first.
2. Heavy or binge drinking is not recommended, as it is also associated with late nights, missed meals, forgotten medications and poor sleep, which can all trigger seizures.
3. Both alcohol and most antiepileptic medications are metabolised by the liver. Chronic and excessive consumption of alcohol can cause liver problems that may alter the effectiveness of the antiepileptic medication.
4. Many recreational drugs, especially stimulants such as cocaine, 'crack', ecstasy and speed (amphetamines) have the potential to cause seizures and it is uncertain what interactions these, or any illegal drugs, may have with prescription medicines.
5. It is important to remember that the use of these recreational drugs is illegal in Australia.



If you have concerns regarding alcohol or other drugs that you think are affecting your seizure control, discuss these with your doctor.

Most people with epilepsy agree that taking their medication regularly and simply being careful with lifestyle minimises their chance of having a seizure.

Recognise and respond to stress

Some stressors cannot be avoided but our response to them can change how they impact on our health. Identifying the causes of stress and finding practical solutions is important for everyone. People react differently to stress, and not all stress-management techniques work for all people.

Here are some known stress-reduction techniques:

- ◆ Muscle relaxation exercises
- ◆ Breathing techniques
- ◆ Yoga / Meditation
- ◆ Effective time-management
- ◆ Music
- ◆ Reading
- ◆ Exercise and sports
- ◆ Hobbies and crafts
- ◆ Good support networks



Contact the local council or community health centre for classes or call Epilepsy Action Australia for information on programs aimed at enhancing social networks and providing support.

If stress is having a significant impact on your life, discuss any concerns with a professional such as a nurse, psychologist or counsellor.

Keep a seizure diary

Seizure diaries can help to identify seizure triggers, and provide a good overview of seizure frequency and presentation.

Your seizure diary should include:

- ◆ Date and time of seizures
- ◆ If you were asleep or awake
- ◆ Type of seizure
- ◆ What happened before, during and after the seizure, if known
- ◆ Medication taken and missed that day, including medication for other conditions
- ◆ Any possible triggers
- ◆ General health and energy level, leading up to the seizures
- ◆ Menstrual cycle for women

Keeping a seizure diary is a good way to identify possible triggers.

Join a program

A variety of programs encourage self-management through:

- ◆ Techniques to deal with issues such as frustration, fatigue, pain and isolation
- ◆ Appropriate exercise for maintaining and improving strength, flexibility, and endurance
- ◆ Appropriate use of medications
- ◆ Communicating effectively with family, friends, and health professionals
- ◆ Nutrition
- ◆ How to evaluate new treatments

Self-management is a growing trend, and with the explosion of information now available to empower consumers, people are more likely to be involved in their health decisions.

FURTHER READING

- > <http://www.health.gov.au/internet/wcms/Publishing.nsf/Content/chronicdisease-conference.htm>
- > Stanford Patient Education Research Centre USA
- > <http://patienteducation.stanford.edu/programs/cdsmp.htm>
- > Expert Patients UK
- > <http://www.expertpatients.nhs.uk/>
- > Life Extension <http://www.lef.org/protocols/prtcl-142a.shtml>
- > BBC Health UK http://www.bbc.co.uk/health/ask_doctor/aspartame.shtml
- > Australian Drug Info Clearinghouse <http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au/browse.asp?ContainerID=drug>

This information is given to provide accurate, general information about epilepsy. Medical information and knowledge changes rapidly and you should consult your doctor for more detailed information. This is not medical advice and you should not make any medication or treatment changes without consulting your doctor.