



Epilepsy and beauty treatments

Introduction

Being able to have beauty treatments is an important part of life for many people. Because looking good can help you to feel good about yourself, beauty treatments can help improve your sense of general well being and quality of life. Beauty treatments might take place in a beauty salon or health spa, for example aromatherapy massage, or they may involve products that you use at home, such as a portable foot spa.

If you have epilepsy, being able to have beauty treatments such as hair removal might be particularly important for you, for example if a possible side effect of your anti-epileptic medication is unwanted hair growth.

Some people with epilepsy have contacted us to say that they have been refused certain beauty treatments because of their epilepsy, or that they need to sign a release form and/or have a letter from their doctor before they can have the treatment.

For many beauty treatments there is no evidence that they could trigger seizures, or that they would be dangerous if you had a seizure during the treatment. If this is the case, why do such cautions exist?

Treatments which involve light

If you have epilepsy, you may be told that beauty treatments involving light, for example sun beds

and laser hair removal, are not suitable for you, or that you need a doctor's letter before you can have the treatment. These warnings are often based on the misconception that all people with epilepsy have seizures triggered by flickering or flashing light. In reality, fewer than five per cent of people with epilepsy have photosensitive epilepsy – the name given to the type of epilepsy where seizures are triggered by flickering or flashing light. Most people with photosensitive epilepsy are only sensitive to light which flickers in the range between 16 and 25 hertz (16-25 times a second), although some people may be sensitive to other ranges. If you are unsure whether or not you have photosensitive epilepsy, speak to your epilepsy specialist.

Sun beds

Because the light used in sun beds does not flicker, it would not trigger a seizure for you if you have photosensitive epilepsy. In theory, if the lights in the sun beds became faulty and started to flicker within the problem range for people with photosensitive epilepsy, this could trigger a seizure, although we have never heard of this happening. If you have photosensitive epilepsy and want to use a sun bed, you could ask staff at the sun bed centre to check that the lights are working properly (not flickering), before you go in.

Laser hair removal

Laser hair removal involves a laser beam targeted at hair follicles to prevent new growth. Intense pulsed light therapy (IPL) is a similar treatment, except that the laser beams used are more concentrated. Although neither treatment can

permanently remove all hair completely, both methods can permanently reduce it. Your eyes must be protected with specially designed goggles during the treatment and there may be a certain amount of pain.

If you have epilepsy, you may be told that you cannot have laser hair removal. This is probably partly because of fears on behalf of the staff that the laser might trigger a seizure. Again, flickering lights are only a possible seizure trigger if you have photosensitive epilepsy. However, the beam of light used is very small, and does not flicker. Epilepsy Action has never heard of laser hair removal or IPL triggering a seizure for someone with photosensitive epilepsy or any other type of epilepsy.

If your epilepsy is uncontrolled, you would need to discuss this with the laser treatment centre. Both you and the staff there would need to discuss what risks, if any, there would be if you had a seizure during the treatment.

Laser skin resurfacing

In this type of treatment, laser or intense pulsed light (IPL) is used to reduce acne scars, birthmarks, sun damage, facial thread veins and other skin blemishes. The laser or IPL removes the top layer of the skin. When the skin heals and grows back it should do so without the blemishes which were previously there. A local anaesthetic may be used for the treatment and your eyes must be protected with specially designed goggles.

As with laser hair removal, you may be told that you cannot have laser skin resurfacing treatment if you have epilepsy. Epilepsy Action is not aware of any reason why you should not have this treatment, if you have photosensitive epilepsy, or any other type of epilepsy. If your seizures are not fully controlled, you and the staff there would need

to discuss what risks, if any, there would be if you had a seizure during the treatment.

Treatments which involve electricity

Sometimes you may be warned against using certain beauty treatments involving electricity, for example electrolysis or electrical products such as abdominal toning belts, if you have epilepsy. As there is no evidence to suggest that electricity can trigger epileptic seizures, the fact that a treatment uses electricity should not be a reason to prevent you from having these beauty treatments.

Electrolysis

In electrolysis a fine filament is inserted into the hair follicle. A minute electrical impulse is sent through the needle to the hair root. This helps to destroy the follicle from which the unwanted hair grows. With several treatments of electrolysis over time, hair growth can be permanently stopped. Electrolysis is usually carried out in a beauty salon, although electrolysis pens are available for use at home.

Epilepsy Action is not aware of any reason why you should not have electrolysis if you have epilepsy.

Electrical body toning products

Electrical body toning products usually consist of a battery powered belt, designed to be worn while exercising. Slendertone is perhaps the most well known electrical body toning brand. Slendertone products work by producing muscle contractions by stimulating the nerves that control your muscles. You feel a mild pulsing sensation, followed by some tightening of your muscles. Your muscles should contract smoothly, hold themselves in a tensed position for a few seconds and gently relax again.

Several electrical body toning products have a warning that they are not suitable for use by people with epilepsy. However, Epilepsy Action is not aware of any reason why you should not use these products, if you have epilepsy.

Foot spas

Foot spas, particularly detox foot spas, sometimes bear a warning that you should not use them if you have epilepsy. Again this may be because of the misconception that because this type of beauty treatment is powered by electricity, it might trigger a seizure if you have epilepsy.

Epilepsy Action is not aware of any reason why you should not use a foot spa, if you have epilepsy.

Rotary epilators

Rotary epilators are similar to electric razors, except instead of a cutting blade on a rotary head, they have rows of tweezers which can pull hairs out by the root.

We are not aware of any reason why you should not use a rotary epilator, if you have epilepsy.

Beauty treatments for relaxation

Massage

Massage usually involves aromatherapy oils and there are certain oils which can trigger seizures and which you should therefore avoid if you have epilepsy. These oils include rosemary, sage, hyssop, fennel and wormwood. However there are many other oils which are safe to use.

If you have epilepsy, sometimes you may be told that massage is not safe for you, because the massage itself might trigger a seizure. This is untrue. Very rarely, some people with epilepsy may have seizures if they become very relaxed. In most

people with epilepsy, relaxation can reduce seizure frequency.

Warnings against people with epilepsy having massage may be based on fear that the person might have a seizure while the massage is taking place. Obviously if you are having frequent seizures, you may have one during the massage. If your seizures are not controlled, it is advisable to make sure that the person doing the massage knows the appropriate first aid.

Some people with epilepsy are warned against having Indian head massage. As long as the same precautions are followed as for massage in general, there should be no reason why this type of massage should be avoided particularly. There may be a misconception that massaging the head may trigger a seizure by stimulating the brain, but this is untrue.

Further information about aromatherapy and epilepsy is available from Epilepsy Action.

Declaring your epilepsy

Beauty therapists usually carry out a consultation with the client before starting a treatment. Therapists are taught that medical conditions such as epilepsy are contraindicated for certain beauty treatments. However if epilepsy is a contraindication, it does not necessarily mean that you cannot have the beauty treatment. If your epilepsy is well controlled you should be able to have most beauty treatments without any restrictions.

If your epilepsy is uncontrolled, and it is likely that you may have a seizure during the treatment, you need to talk to discuss possible risks with your beauty therapist. It may be appropriate to talk to your GP or epilepsy specialist about whether or

not the treatment would be advisable for you. In some cases you may need a letter from your doctor before having the treatment.

It may be helpful to tell your beauty therapist what happens when you have a seizure and what they should do if you have one. If it helps, perhaps take along one of Epilepsy Action's information leaflets, to explain your epilepsy.

Your rights

If you have epilepsy and live in the UK, you are covered by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). The DDA means that organisations such as employers, colleges or beauty salons must not treat you less favourably than other people because you have epilepsy. All organisations that provide goods, facilities or services to the public, whether paid for or for free, no matter how large or small they are, must follow the DDA.

Under the DDA, organisations must not place blanket restrictions on people because they have epilepsy, but must consider each person's case on an individual basis. An example of a blanket restriction might be saying that no one with epilepsy can have a certain treatment, or that everyone with epilepsy needs a letter from their doctor before they can have the treatment. Unless every person who wants to have treatment requires a letter from their doctor, it may be discrimination to only ask people with epilepsy to provide one. In many cases it will be an unnecessary inconvenience, not to mention expense, as doctors can often charge to provide such letters.

The DDA also means that service providers must try to make 'reasonable adjustments' for disabled people, including people with epilepsy, such as providing extra help or making changes to the way they deliver services. An example of reasonable

adjustment might be the beauty treatment provider being willing to make staff aware what to do if you have a seizure during beauty treatment.

What to do if you are refused beauty treatment

Firstly, it is important to find out exactly why you have been refused treatment or told that you must have a doctor's letter. It is not enough to simply be told that it is because you have epilepsy. Is it because of a misconception that light or electricity involved in the treatment may cause you to have a seizure? Or is it because of concerns about what to do if you have a seizure during the treatment? Is it because the salon is not prepared to train staff in epilepsy awareness or first aid?

It is advisable to try and talk to the beauty service provider to resolve any problems with them first. In the UK if this fails and you feel that you may have been discriminated against by being refused beauty treatment, you can contact the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) for advice. The EHRC is an independent body set up to stop discrimination and promote equality of opportunity for disabled people. In a limited number of cases, the EHRC supports people in bringing cases to court under the Disability Discrimination Act. The EHRC runs a Disability Conciliation Service which aims to help people to resolve disputes about goods and services without going to court. To find out if your case has a legal basis, contact the EHRC helpline:

Equality and Human Rights Commission
Telephone: 08457 622 633
Website: www.equalityhumanrights.com

If you cannot resolve your dispute with your beauty service provider, and the EHRC are unable to help you, you may wish to contact a solicitor.

They should be able to advise if you have a legal basis for your case.

Conclusion

Some people may feel beauty treatments are a trivial matter, but to many people they are very important for quality of life and a general sense of wellbeing. Epilepsy Action believes that people with epilepsy should have the same rights as everybody else, in all areas of life.

If your beauty treatment provider would like more information about epilepsy, please ask them to contact us for an information pack. With nearly half a million people in the UK with epilepsy, they could be missing out on a lot of potential business if they exclude people with epilepsy from their services.

You may wish to contact us if you have been advised against using any other kinds of beauty treatment not mentioned in this article, to see if we have any further information. Please contact our Advice and Information team on the Epilepsy Helpline freephone 0808 800 5050, helpline@epilepsy.org.uk, or write to us at the usual address.

As Epilepsy Action is not a medical organisation, we cannot advise if particular beauty treatments are right for you. If you have any concerns about whether or not to have a particular beauty treatment, you should discuss these with your family doctor, epilepsy specialist, or epilepsy specialist nurse, if you have one.

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Epilepsy Helpline

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