Stress and epilepsy

People with epilepsy often say that stress triggers their seizures.¹ And having epilepsy can be a cause of stress too. This information looks at the relationship between stress and epilepsy.

What is stress?

Stress is a normal physical and mental reaction. It happens when we think we've lost control of what's going on around us. It's something that affects most people, and if it only lasts a short time, it isn't usually harmful.² But it can be, if it goes on for too long.³

People feel stressed for lots of reasons; work, money, and relationship problems are just a few.

What are the symptoms of stress?

Stress can cause many different symptoms. It can affect how you feel, think and behave. It also affects how your body works, so can cause sweating, problems with sleeping, concentrating, and thinking. It can also make you feel anxious, irritable, and weepy. You might lose your temper more easily, drink or eat more, or act unreasonably. You may also have headaches, tense muscles, pain, or dizziness.⁴

What does stress do to your body?

When you are in a threatening or challenging situation, your brain produces chemicals that cause your adrenal glands to produce 'stress hormones'. These hormones make your heart, liver, muscles and other organs ready to take action. This is sometimes called the fight-or-flight response.⁵ It's a normal reaction that allows us to stay focused and motivated, cope with challenges, and escape from harmful situations, if necessary.

Once the pressure or threat has passed, your stress hormone levels will usually return to normal. However, if you're constantly under stress, these hormones will remain in your body, leading to the symptoms of stress. For some people, long-term stress can lead to:⁶

- Heart problems
- High blood pressure
- Skin problems

• Pain

It can also make you more vulnerable to infection.\(^7\)

For more information about the long-term effects of stress see the PsychCentral Website: psychcentral.com

**Stress and epilepsy**

**Can epilepsy and seizures cause stress?**

Living with a long-term condition like epilepsy can be frustrating and disabling. And the fear of losing control and having a seizure can be very stressful.\(^8\) Here are some people with epilepsy talking about how stress affects their seizures:

“I have a lovely partner now, who understands my epilepsy. But when we first got together, I got really stressed about having one of my turns and wetting myself. Of course, the more stressed I got, the more seizures I had. Thank goodness, she understands and is still here for me.” Mo.

“Stress definitely affects me. Work is really stressing me out at the moment and it can’t be a coincidence that my epilepsy is playing up, when normally it’s well controlled…I just hate the thought of any of my team seeing me have a seizure.” Sam

“I’ve had epilepsy over 20 years, and stress plays a very big part. It’s not just consciously worrying about things, as hidden stresses are there all the time. You know, even positive things can be stressful, so even going anywhere different, or taking a holiday can trigger my seizures.” Jamie

**What is the relationship between stress and seizures?**

For some people, stress doesn’t affect their epilepsy, but it is a seizure trigger for some people. It may also cause their epilepsy to develop in the first place.\(^9\) This is more likely if the stress is severe, lasts a long time, or affects someone very early in life.\(^10\) In very young children, stress affects the development of the brain. In older people, long-term stress can change the way the brain works. For some people, this causes epilepsy to develop.

The parts of the brain which regulate the stress response are also often involved in epilepsy, and so it’s not difficult to imagine how stress could play a role in triggering seizures.

Long-term stress can change the way people think and feel about their lives, and how they react to situations they find themselves in.

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\(^8\) Galtrey CM, Muula M, Cock HR, (2016) Stress and epilepsy: fact or fiction, and what can we do about it? Pract Neurol [online] Pract Neurol 2016;0:1-9 doi:10.1136 check date before finalising

\(^9\) Galtrey CM, Muula M, Cock HR,(2016) Stress and epilepsy: fact or fiction, and what can we do about it? [online] Pract Neurol 2016;0:1-9 doi:10.1136 check date before finalising

People who are stressed might also:

- Have problems sleeping
- Eat too much or too little
- Drink too much alcohol
- Feel anxious or depressed
- Over breathe
- Forget to take their epilepsy medicines

These are all things that can make seizures more likely too. Taking active steps to help manage stress is good for your general health, and may also improve your seizure control.

Watch this NHS Choices video about coping with stress.

**Managing stress**

We all deal with stressful situations in different ways. And not everyone facing stress becomes ill or has a seizure. But, if stress is a trigger for your seizures, there are lots of ways you might like to manage it:

- Eat a well-balanced diet
- Aim to get active
- Limit the amount of alcohol that you drink
- Try to get a good night’s sleep
- Share your feelings and ask for support.
- Make time to relax and do the things you enjoy doing.
- Learn some relaxation techniques
- Learn about mindfulness
- Join a stress management group or class

Have a look at this Brainsmart video from the BBC website:

**Online learning**

Epilepsy Action has an online learning course called Epilepsy and Wellbeing. If you enroll for this course, you will be able to look at ways of managing your stress. For more information go to: learn.epilepsy.org.uk/courses/epilepsy-and-your-wellbeing/

You can find more about the different stress management strategies in the following resources:

**Website**


**Books**
• **Stress Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Wellness**

• **Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world**

• **The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook (New Harbinger Self-Help Workbook)**

• **Thoughts & Feelings: Taking Control of Your Moods and Your Life: Taking Control of Your Mood and Your Life**

• **Overcoming Stress**

**CD**

• **Applied Relaxation Training (Relaxation & Stress Reduction)**

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**Useful Contacts**

**NHS Choices**  
Website: nhs.uk/conditions

**Mind, the mental health charity**  
Tel: 0300 123 3393  
Website: mind.org.uk

**Samaritans**  
Tel: 116 123  
Website: samaritans.org

**International Stress Management Association (ISMA)**  
Website: isma.org.uk

**Counselling Directory**  
Tel: 0844 8030 240  
Website: counselling-directory.org.uk

**About this information**

This information is written by Epilepsy Action’s advice and information team, with guidance and input from people living with epilepsy, and medical experts. If there is anything you would like to say about the information, please contact us at epilepsy.org.uk/feedback

If you would like to see this information with references, visit the Advice and Information references section of our website. If you are unable to access the internet, please contact our Epilepsy Action Helpline freephone on 0808 800 5050.
Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information but cannot be held liable for any actions taken based on this information.

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Conflict of interest

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Your support

We hope you have found this information helpful. As a charity, we rely on donations to provide our advice and information. If you would like to make a donation, here are some ways you can do this.

Visit epilepsy.org.uk/donate
Text ACT NOW to 70700 (This will cost you £5 plus your usual cost of sending a text. Epilepsy Action will receive £5.)
Send a cheque payable to Epilepsy Action to the address below.

Did you know you can also become a member of Epilepsy Action from as little as £1 a month? To find out more, visit epilepsy.org.uk/join or call 0113 210 8800.

Epilepsy Action Helpline
Freephone 0808 800 5050; text 0753 741 0044; email helpline@epilepsy.org.uk; tweet @epilepsyadvice

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