Epilepsy: contraception, conception and pregnancy
This information is for you if you are a girl or woman with epilepsy. It tells you how having epilepsy will affect your choice of contraception. It advises you about support that is available for you before and during pregnancy. It also tells you why it is advisable to plan every pregnancy, wherever possible.

Contraception
If you are in a sexual relationship, or are considering starting one, it is important to find a contraception that works well for you. Here are some ways that having epilepsy or taking epilepsy medicines may affect your choice of contraception.

- Some types of contraception are not recommended at all for women with epilepsy. They may lead to an unplanned pregnancy.
- Some epilepsy medicines can make some types of hormonal contraception work less well than they should. This may lead to an unplanned pregnancy.
- Some types of hormonal contraception can make some epilepsy medicines work less effectively. This may lead to an increase in your seizures.

Up-to-date information about epilepsy and contraception is available from Epilepsy Action. You can also speak to your GP or your local contraception and sexual health services for advice about what may work well for you.

Planning a pregnancy
Medical professionals advise that you avoid getting pregnant until after you have had pre-conception counselling (see below). This is because there is a small risk that having seizures, or taking epilepsy medicines during pregnancy, may affect your health and your baby. With careful planning before you get pregnant, these risks can usually be reduced.

If you find out that you are pregnant, and you have not planned it, do not stop taking your epilepsy medicines. This could cause you to have more frequent or severe seizures. This would put you and your baby at higher risk than if you continued taking your medicines. Speak to your GP as soon as possible. They will be able to make sure that you get the help and advice you need.

Folic acid
Taking folic acid, before and during pregnancy, reduces the risk of a baby having spina bifida. Most women take 400 micrograms of folic acid. If you have epilepsy, medical professionals advise that you take five milligrams of folic acid every day. It is advisable to take this all the time that there is any chance that you could become pregnant. You will need to get a prescription for this dose from your GP.

Pre-conception counselling
This is an appointment to plan future pregnancies with a medical professional. You can ask your GP to arrange an appointment for you at any age. You can even ask before you have started a sexual relationship. It is especially important to have pre-conception counselling if you are thinking about having a baby in the near future, or there is a chance that you could become pregnant.

During the appointment, you will talk about ways to make your pregnancy as healthy as possible. The medical professional will review your epilepsy and epilepsy medicine. They may suggest making changes to your epilepsy medicine before you
try to get pregnant. This may be to try and get better control of your seizures. Or, it may be to change your medicine to one that carries a lower risk of causing problems for your baby. The advice you are given will depend very much on your individual circumstances.

**Epilepsy, epilepsy medicines and pregnancy**
Most women with epilepsy have a normal pregnancy and delivery. However, your epilepsy and epilepsy medicines may slightly increase your risk of having a baby with a birth problem. In the general population, the risk of having a baby with a birth problem that needs medical treatment is around one or two in every 100 babies. Some epilepsy medicines, taken at low doses, carry very little extra risk. The risks may increase, depending on the type, dose and number of medicines you take. This is why it is so important that you are given individual advice about your pregnancy.

If you would like more information about the risks of epilepsy medicines in pregnancy, contact the UK Epilepsy and Pregnancy Register, freephone 0800 389 1248, www.epilepsyandpregnancy.co.uk

**Pregnancy**
When you become pregnant, see your GP as soon as possible. They can arrange prompt referrals to support services, such as a midwife, obstetrician, neurologist, epilepsy specialist nurse or doctor. The level of support that you receive will depend very much on your individual circumstances. If you are receiving support from a number of different medical professionals, you should have a shared-care plan in your hand-held pregnancy notes. This should include advice about who to contact if you have any concerns about your epilepsy, seizures or treatment. If your seizures change while you are pregnant, ask your GP or epilepsy specialist to review your epilepsy medicines.

**Taking your epilepsy medicines during pregnancy**
It is extremely important to keep taking your epilepsy medicine during pregnancy. If you suddenly stop taking your medicine without medical advice, this could result in a situation that could put your life at risk. If nausea or vomiting make it difficult to take or keep down your epilepsy medicines, seek advice from your GP or epilepsy specialist as soon as possible.

Epilepsy Action has more detailed information about epilepsy and having a baby.

**About this publication**
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Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information but cannot be held liable for any actions taken. If you want to know our sources, or give us feedback, please contact us.

**Epilepsy Helpline**
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