



## Helping Canadians with Disability/Chronic Disease Get Physically Active: Tip Sheets for Intermediaries

*For Canadians with a disability, regular physical activity may be even more important than it is for the rest of the population. For a person with a disability, an active lifestyle can open doors to increased health, social inclusion and self-empowerment - doors which might otherwise remain closed. Access to physical activity can eliminate the likelihood of acquiring secondary health conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure or heart disease. Being active builds resiliency and can provide an all-important outlet for a person with a disability.*

*These tip sheets are designed to provide general information in support of Canada's Physical Activity Guidelines, developed by the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology.*

# EPILEPSY

## General Information

### Facts and Figures

- Every day in Canada, approximately 38 people learn that they have epilepsy;
- There likely exist more cases of Epilepsy than are reported;
- Due to the negative stigma attached to the disorder, many people with Epilepsy are often afraid to admit that they have this condition and seek help.

### What is Epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a chronic brain condition that causes repetitive seizures. It can affect people of all ages. The cause is not well understood.

Some people may acquire epilepsy as a result of stroke, brain injury, viral infections of the brain (i.e. meningitis, viral encephalitis), or alcohol poisoning from substance abuse.

### What is a Seizure?

A seizure typically presents as abnormal movement of the body or convulsions. It can last for seconds or for a few minutes.

Seizures do not necessarily indicate epilepsy. People can experience seizures as a result of head trauma, high fever, or lack of oxygen to the brain.

There are many different types of seizures. The most common are:

**Tonic-clonic seizures** (grand mal seizures): These usually last for several minutes, and present as repetitive muscle contractions throughout the entire body. The person may lose consciousness, lose control of his/her bowel and bladder, and may experience temporary cessation of breathing.

**Absence seizures** (petit mal seizures): These usually last no longer than 30 seconds and are characterized by minimal body movement, but the person usually loses consciousness very briefly. This type is most common in children only.

**Partial seizures:** These include short term symptoms of atypical behaviour and the experience of unusual sensations. Typically the person does not lose consciousness.

### **Impact and Triggers of Epilepsy**

There is no cure for epilepsy. Most people are treated with long-term medication plans. These medications can have profound side-effects that can significantly affect daily living for some people. Most often however, the effects are mild and short term in duration, and are treatable by adjusting dosage.

Common side effects of medications may include:

- Fatigue
- Abdominal discomfort
- Blurred vision
- Dizziness

Some people will undergo brain surgery to eliminate seizures.

### **Common Seizure Triggers for People with Epilepsy can include:**

- Stress
- Poor nutrition
- Missed medication
- Flickering lights
- Skipping meals
- Illness
- Fever
- Allergies
- Lack of sleep
- Emotions (i.e. anger, worry, fear, etc.)
- Heat and/or humidity

### **Warning Signs of a Seizure**

Many people experience a sensation before the onset of a seizure. This is called an "aura". Often times an "aura" can provide the person with enough warning time to get to a safe place in a lying position.

The experience of an "aura" is different for everyone. It can range from a change in body temperature, to feeling anxiety, to experiencing strange tastes or smells.

## **Working with a person who has Epilepsy**

### **Tips for Getting Active**

As a physical activity leader, what should you do if a person has a seizure?

- Remain calm;
- Minimize the crowd to the best of your ability. This is likely an embarrassing situation for the person and there is no reason that others need to be watching;
- Make sure the person is in a safe position by assisting them to the floor and removing all clutter and objects that might injure the person;
- Protect the person's head and body;
- Loosen clothing that might be restricting;
- Do not restrain the person during a seizure;
- Remember that while a person is having a seizure they may or may not hear you;
- DO NOT put anything in the person's mouth. It is a common misconception that people may swallow their tongue during a seizure. This is false, as it is impossible to swallow your tongue;
- After the person has finished a seizure, roll them onto their side to allow any excess saliva to fall out and to ensure that the airway is open;
- After a seizure, it is important to comfort and reassure the person. Help them to relax and make them feel at ease. Allow them to rest or sleep if necessary;
- If a seizure lasts for longer than 5 minutes or becomes continuous without full recovery in between, seek medical attention immediately.

### **Physical Activity Tips and Modifications**

- People with epilepsy can fully participate in physical activity. Research has shown that regular physical activity can decrease the frequency of seizures for people with epilepsy;
- Ensure that the person has taken their medications prior to activity;
- Make sure you know the typical triggers which may cause the individual to have a seizure, in order to avoid these situations during activity;
- Try to avoid activities that may result in a blow to the head (i.e. contact sports or activities that risk falling) - as trauma to the head can likely trigger a seizure;
- Avoid aquatic activities in places where the sun or light reflects off of the water – this can also trigger a seizure.

## Resources

Epilepsy Canada - [www.epilepsy.ca](http://www.epilepsy.ca)

National Consortium for Physical Education and Recreation for Individuals with Disabilities (1995). Adapted Physical Education National Standards. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Steadward, R.D., Wheeler, G.D., and Watkinson, E.J. (2003). Adapted Physical Activity. onton, AB: University of Alberta Press

Side Effects (seizure medications):

[www.epilepsy.com/epilepsy/medicine\\_sideeffects](http://www.epilepsy.com/epilepsy/medicine_sideeffects)

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**Active Living Alliance for Canadians with a Disability**

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