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### **Preventing Seizures over the Christmas Holidays; Brainwave's 12 Top Tips**

Christmas can be a hectic, exciting and stressful time for everyone and people with epilepsy are no exception. Every year at the beginning of January Brainwave staff receive some calls from people who have had seizures over the Christmas period. For some it will have been the first ever episode and they will be concerned about whether they may go on to become diagnosed with epilepsy in the event of a subsequent seizure. For most though it will mean a recurrence of seizures within the context of diagnosed epilepsy. Often in discussing the events leading up to the seizure, it can emerge that a range of trigger factors may have been at play to reduce the person's seizure threshold. With this in mind we are highlighting some ways of reducing the risk of breakthrough seizures over Christmas and trying to address some of the questions people ask.

1. Start early and plan ahead, last minute rushing around in the run up to Christmas is the norm for many people but can be very stressful for someone with epilepsy. You can reduce the stress factor by being organized and breaking the tasks up into manageable pieces that can be spread out over time. Keep lists and try to focus on doing a certain amount each week, whatever is feasible. Shopping online is increasingly popular and can help reduce the need to rush around the shops. This should mean you don't have to overdo it at any point and give you free time to enjoy the atmosphere without the pressure.
2. Transport and Travel: If you are unable to drive currently this may affect how and where you shop. You may have been used to going about doing all the shopping for gifts and trimmings before. Now you may need to consider whether to seek help with lifts from others or whether you can actually manage to get the groceries, gifts and the Christmas tree in one outing. Consider your energy levels and pace yourself. Public transport can be in great demand at this busy time so try to avoid rush hour in order to get a seat. Be realistic about what you can undertake and if someone offers to get something for you consider accepting the offer. Whatever makes life easier and less stressful is welcome. Shopping locally or online again can reduce the transport demands.
3. Skipping meals: It might be tempting to pass by when you see long queues at restaurants when shopping but don't be tempted to skip meals. During the holidays our patterns can alter so it's good to ensure you get to keep to a regular pattern of eating.
4. Take your medication as normal. Ensure you have sufficient supplies of your prescription to last the holidays.

5. **Sleep Debt:** Regular sleep patterns are important for people with epilepsy. Over the holidays these can change due to the late night festivities or morning lie-ins. If you are planning a late night try to ensure you are well rested prior to going out and take your medication as normal. If possible have some extra sleep the following day also. This will reduce your sleep debt (the amount of missed sleep you owe yourself).
6. **Relaxation:** Take a few minutes of quiet time each morning and evening to listen to a guided visualization, soothing music or do meditation – whatever method works for you to unwind and take a break from the cares of the day.
7. **Alcohol:** Whether at parties or in the home everyone is potentially more exposed to alcohol over Christmas. Your doctor may have advised you on what is a safe limit for you. Stick to this advice, keep your intake moderate (typically 1-2 units) and avoid binge drinking. Don't be afraid to say no to another one. If your friends have your interests at heart they won't force the issue or encourage you to drink more than is safe for you. Consider having shandies instead or non-alcoholic beers and wines as options. Remember you don't have to "keep up" with everyone else to enjoy yourself. You have the right to choose not to put yourself at risk.
8. **Other Stimulants and street drugs:** Whether we are talking about high caffeine energy drinks or any kind of street drugs these are all associated with increasing seizures and must be avoided.
9. **Christmas lights and New Year Firework Displays:** While flashing light is a trigger for a small number of people with photosensitive epilepsy the Christmas lights sold in stores here should all meet the required health and safety standards for flicker. Risk factors for photosensitive epilepsy are flicker from 5-20 flashes per second (hertz) glare and strong contrast, and saturated reds. Christmas lights circuits should flicker at about 1 hertz (flash per second). However, there have been a few anecdotal reports of people who feel they were affected by faulty lighting. Also if several circuits are combined a photosensitive effect could be generated. If it is not possible to avoid the lighting the simple measure of covering one eye with one hand should be sufficient to prevent a seizure on exposure to the flashing lights. Firework displays are live events and it is difficult to predict the flash rates they might generate. As fireworks are often held in darkness and the contrast could enhance the photosensitive effect. Again the measure of covering one eye with one hand is advised (closing the eyes is not effective as light can penetrate the skin of the eyelids).
10. **Excitement:** Particularly for the children the anticipation of Christmas can cause huge excitement which although it seems like fun is felt by the body in a similar way to a stress reaction. Keeping the atmosphere calm and routine stable can help prevent overexcitement and sleep problems.

11. Family Support (or lack of it): Christmas is a time when many people expect to spend more time than usual with family and this can have both its joys and downsides. If your family is supportive that is a great bonus but if they have difficulties accepting epilepsy it can place a strain on relationships. If you lack a supportive family or network of friends this can leave you feeling isolated at a time of great emotional expectation. Consider in advance how you will obtain support to help you through the holidays whether through talking to your GP, joining a support group, getting referred to counseling, or calling a telephone helpline like the Samaritans. Don't be afraid to ask for the help you need to cope.
  
12. Expectations: Keep your expectations for Christmas realistic. If you hope for perfection the likelihood is you will be disappointed at least some of that time. There is a huge emotional investment we can make in wanting Christmas to be a certain way and the reality may be less than perfect. If we can be flexible around this we can accept that the images we see in TV and advertising are idealized and that the rest of us live in the real world we will be taking a healthier approach. If we could be content with a "good enough" Christmas we might actually be able to relax and enjoy it more.

Brainwave wishes all its members a safe and enjoyable Christmas and New Year