

Epilepsy, Stress and Complementary Therapies

by

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Stress has long been identified as a trigger for seizures. Steps can be taken to avoid stress, once recognised as a trigger. Your goal should be to manage your stress, and in trying to achieve this, you alone have the choice of how to do so. The aim is to choose a method that benefits your health and suits your lifestyle.

Can complementary therapies help?

There has been some research into complementary therapies and their benefits in stress reduction. Research into a link with seizure control is limited however. I am frequently asked about the use of therapies, and I will give examples of some that have shown beneficial results for some people with epilepsy.

Complementary and Alternative Therapies: What is the difference?

Alternative and Complementary therapies are being offered to people with epilepsy. However, alternative therapy is regarded as a substitute for medical and conventional treatment. Most medical health care professionals would not support the use of these treatments in epilepsy, as there is little scientific evidence to support or validate them.

Complementary therapies work alongside the conventional treatments, and offer a focus on improving quality of life using a holistic model of care. You should always use a qualified therapist. There are currently no statutory registration requirements for practitioners of complementary treatments in Ireland. If you do plan to use such a therapy **never reduce or discontinue medication** without consulting your doctor – always seek advice. Remember, good practice is for the qualified therapist to seek consent from your GP prior to carrying out a treatment, when you disclose your epilepsy as part of the consultation process. Beware of therapists that state they can “cure” your epilepsy.

What complementary therapies have been shown to benefit control of epilepsy?

Aromatherapy: Use of aromatic oils derived from plants to encourage a feeling of well-being and health.

Massage is the key method for treating with aromatherapy, but it is not the only way. Some research into the effects of essential oils on epilepsy has been done. Dr. Tim Betts of the Seizure Clinic at Birmingham University, found benefits of the use of certain essential oils in patients with intractable epilepsy, (patients who do not respond to any form of drug therapy). Treatments involving a “smell-technique” and hypnosis seemed to have a lasting effect on seizures.

It is not yet clear but it is thought that some patients can condition their brain to prevent seizures with the help of a particular aroma. Dr. Betts felt that aromatherapy might be best reserved, as a short-term treatment, for those who are experiencing a bad time with seizures. Studies have found that certain oils can exacerbate or increase the risk of seizures, for example, camphor, rosemary, sage, hyssop, sweet fennel and wormwood. On the other hand, jasmine has consistently shown positive effects, along with camomile, ylang ylang and lavender. Massage, while providing relaxing

benefits, is not needed as a continued method of treatment as the individual can simply benefit by simply smelling the oil.

Remember, if you do plan to use the essential oil in the bath, never do so when alone in the house and only have a shallow bath.

What other treatments are safe for me to try?

Acupuncture: An ancient Chinese therapy, acupuncture is the insertion of very fine needles at certain points on the body, thought to release a blockage in energy and stimulate nerve endings, promoting healing and health, in a holistic way. Acupuncture does not appear to have shown any harmful side effects in a person with epilepsy.

Yoga/Meditation: Both yoga and meditation are known to be beneficial in the reduction of stress and to promote health through teaching the individual self-help therapy. Both can promote sleep, stress reduction and physical fitness. For the person with epilepsy who finds that tiredness and stress can trigger seizures, use of these techniques may be of benefit.

Herbalism and Homeopathy: Use of these treatments has not shown harmful effects to the person with epilepsy, but no research studies have promoted their use in reduction of seizures. Indeed St. John's Wort, sometimes used in the treatment of depression, has been shown to interfere with anti-epilepsy drug levels in some studies, and should therefore be avoided. If you are using St. John's Wort at this time and are worried about its effects, it is advised that you do not discontinue use suddenly, and discuss with your doctor.

For further advice on therapies available in your area please contact the Association of Registered Complementary Therapists of Ireland at 054 83425 – www.complementarytherapists.org

What is Neurofeedback/Biofeedback and how is it used?

This therapy uses electroencephalograph (EEG), an electronic monitoring device used to measure brain activity. Using a monitoring screen this therapy conditions the patient to recognise normal and own seizure related rhythm in brain activity. Relaxation and other techniques can be used to allow the individual to regulate brain activity, thus reducing seizures. This treatment is not currently available in Ireland.

Can diet affect epilepsy?

The person with epilepsy should ensure they are getting a healthy well balanced diet. For some people, skipping meals can be a trigger for seizures. Following the simple rule of small amounts of food, and often, may help to prevent this. The Department of Health can provide you with some information in relation to healthy eating, Tel: 01 496664/496665. There is little evidence to support that food allergies may affect seizures.

Should I supplement my diet?

Women of child bearing age should supplement their diet with Folic Acid at a dose of 5mg, only available on prescription. For women of menopausal age, certain anti-epileptic medication can increase the risk of osteoporosis, and their diet may need to be supplemented with vitamin D and calcium. This should be discussed with your doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse.

Use of supplements can be of help for those who experience hair loss on Sodium Valporate (Epilum) – and again your doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse can advise you on this.

I've heard that Evening Primrose Oil should be avoided. Why?

Clinical trials do not support a link between Evening Primrose Oil and seizures, but some people who have used this supplement have experienced re-occurrence of seizures after being seizure free. Starflower and Borage Oil are similar to Evening Primrose Oil, and therefore I do advise only to use these supplements with caution.

How can the Ketogenic Diet help in epilepsy?

The Ketogenic Diet is similar to the Atkins Diet, in that it induces a similar Ketotic state in the body. The diet restricts protein and particularly carbohydrates, by providing a diet unusually high in fat. Fluids are also restricted. In a starving state the body will use its store of fat, as it has no supply of carbohydrate, resulting "ketosis". The Ketogenic Diet allows for this condition to be reached by only offering fats for the body to use as an energy supply. Ketosis is said to increase seizure threshold for some people. Indeed the Ketogenic Diet has been shown to be particularly effective in children with intractable epilepsy, and particularly in Lennox Gastaut Syndrome.

However, the diet should only be undertaken under medical supervision, and with dietician advice. Compliance with the diet can be difficult, and has some unpleasant side effects, including constipation, diarrhoea, fatigue, headache, and fluctuating weight. There is little evidence for effectiveness after puberty.

Some research has been carried out in the United States in the use of a low glycaemic index diet and its effectiveness in seizure reduction, but this is in the early stages and is only beginning to be recognised by Neurologists in the treatment of intractable epilepsy.

Please note that the information given above is only a guide to therapies available, and any benefits gained from these treatments can vary from person to person.

All individuals affected by epilepsy are different and may require individualised care. The above sample questions are written as a guide only. If you are unsure about anything mentioned or have any further questions please contact your Neurologist; GP; or the Brainwave advice line 01 4554133