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EXERCISE, SPORT & LEISURE

It is generally recognised that physical exercise has many benefits:

- improves general fitness
- increases energy levels
- improves mood,
- relieves stress

For a person with epilepsy improving overall health and wellbeing can also help reduce seizures. It can also help people feel more in control of their health.

Participating in sports activities can provide the opportunity for physical exercise with the added benefit of social interaction with others. This can help combat the feeling of isolation that many people with epilepsy experience because of their condition.

Epilepsy Ireland would like everyone with epilepsy to adopt the message of International Epilepsy Day – February 9th – “Embrace sport, be active, be healthy and above all be safe”.

Developing a healthy exercise plan – There are 4 types of fitness

1. Flexibility - Being flexible you move more comfortably. Limited flexibility can cause pain, lead to injury and make muscles work harder. Inactivity leads to inflexibility
2. Strength -Muscles need to be exercised to maintain strength. Inactivity can cause muscles to weaken and shrink
3. Endurance - Feeling energetic depends on the fitness of the heart, lungs and muscles. The heart and lungs must work efficiently to carry the oxygen-rich blood to the muscles
4. Balance - Good balance can prevent falls. Strong and coordinated muscles in the trunk and legs are an important part of good balance

A Healthy Exercise Plan should aim to address all 4 types of fitness.

It must be stressed that before undertaking any major exercise routine or programme you should discuss your proposed plans with your doctor.

How to get started?

Before any activity is undertaken, the obvious question to ask is - “is this realistic given my particular circumstances”? Everyone’s epilepsy is different and your plans need to reflect the realities of your own individual circumstances.

Understanding your own epilepsy can help you decide what exercise suits you. This includes knowing what happens during your seizures, whether there is anything that triggers your seizures, and telling other people how they can help you if a seizure happens.

You may not feel like doing exercise because you feel tired due to seizures or because of the side effects of your medication. However, even gentle exercise can actually boost energy levels.

Some people with epilepsy worry about doing exercise in case they hurt themselves during a seizure. Research has shown that although seizures can happen during exercise, the positive effects of exercise may help to reduce seizures for some people with epilepsy.

In choosing how you might become active and improve your health, remember the three golden rules:

1. Make realistic choices
2. Keep epilepsy in perspective
3. Enjoy and be safe

Exercise does not have to mean joining a gym or running in a marathon. Remember the journey of a hundred miles begins with the first step.

So to begin the journey to better health why not consider walking; it is one of the easiest and safest exercises that most people can do.

Walking with a friend means they can help if you have a seizure. If you decide to walk alone, use a well-known route; avoid busy roads; and take a mobile phone with you; these simple measures can help you to feel safe. Some people with epilepsy also choose to carry medical ID that tells other people how to help them if they have a seizure when out and about.

Taking the all important first step:

It can help to start with a short, regular session of activity that feels manageable and that becomes part of your daily routine. Some ideas to help you start and keep going with exercise include the following.

- Stretch to warm up
It is important to warm up and stretch before and after energetic activity. Stretching warms your muscles and helps prevent strain and aching. Doing a stretching routine every day can also help you develop a habit of exercising that is easier to maintain. Stretching can also help relieve stress because it releases tension from your muscles, making you feel more relaxed.
- Walk around the block or even around your house regularly, and gradually increase the distance.
- Do exercise to music that you enjoy.
- Drink water, diluted fruit juice or squash while you exercise, to help replace the fluids and body salts you lose.
- Do not exercise straight after a meal.
- Keep a diary of how you feel after exercising. Give yourself credit every time you exercise – it can take determination and self-discipline.

Now for the second step:

Once you have got into the habit of regular exercise and can feel the benefits, it might be time to consider getting in touch with a local club or sports outlet and participate with others. Social interaction can help improve self-confidence and can be a way to make new friends and help with any feelings of isolation.

The issue of disclosing one's epilepsy is also something that should be considered very carefully, to ensure others are aware of the condition and the appropriate support that might be needed in the event of a seizure.

Competitive sports activities

Every person's epilepsy is different and needs to be assessed individually but there should be no reason why a person with epilepsy cannot take part in a sport that is considered low risk for them.

The majority of sports are safe for most people with epilepsy to participate in and have not been shown to increase the chance of someone having a seizure. This includes contact sports like soccer, rugby and hurling. However, some contact sports may come with an increased risk of head injuries, which could affect epilepsy for some people.

Protective sports headgear helps to reduce this risk, and there are also many team sports that are not likely to risk head injuries. Telling your coach or someone on the team about your epilepsy and giving them first aid information means they can help you if you have a seizure.

Sports such as boxing which involve direct and frequent contact to the head should be avoided because of the potential for injury to head. Extreme activities such as hang-gliding or rock-climbing should also be avoided due the risks involved if a seizure should occur.

Some activities which might be considered safer if pursued with others might include:

Swimming

This is a great way to exercise; you must ensure the right safety precautions are taken.

- If you do have seizures, it is a good idea to swim with someone who knows about the type of seizures you have and how to help you if you have a seizure in the water.
- Swimming in a pool is generally safer than swimming in the sea or in other open water, because of currents, tides, changes in depth and colder water. It is also easier for someone else to see if you have a seizure in a pool, and you could tell the lifeguards at a pool how they can help you if you have a seizure.

Cycling

Where seizures are controlled there should be no increased risk. If seizures still occur, busy roads are best avoided and a companion is advisable.