

EPILEPSY FACT SHEET



Water Safety and Epilepsy



Physical activity is very good for most people and the person who has epilepsy is no exception. In fact, it has been found that in most cases physical activity FAVOURABLY affects the epilepsy. The tension and stress that can trigger seizures may be reduced through physical activity—which includes swimming. To maximize the benefits of swimming and water sports, and minimize the possibility of a preventable incident—**BE WATER SMART!**

- **DO NOT Swim alone.** Swim with a friend, and preferably in an area that is supervised by a National Lifesaving Society (NLS) trained lifeguard. Supervision while swimming is important for anyone; **it is even more important for someone who has a seizure disorder.** This is especially true if the person does not experience an aura prior to a seizure and/or has difficulty maintaining seizure control.
- **STAY CLOSE TO CHILDREN.** Under no circumstances should a child be left unsupervised around water, especially if there is a diagnosed seizure disorder. Stay nearby—**within arms reach**—maintain a close watch, and be sure that others supervising are aware of the condition and how to help (preferably an NLS trained lifeguard). **If the child does not swim, use an approved life jacket or personal flotation device (PFD)**—unless you are holding him. Limit the number of inflatable water toys, and if you have a home pool, remove them from the water after swim time. This will minimize the risk of a child falling into the water trying to reach them. Keep your home pool gated and locked when not in use.
- **If seizures are brought-on by bright or flickering lights, then it is important to realize that the lights reflecting off splashing water may trigger seizure activity.** Blue, polarized sunglasses worn during outdoor activities can help minimize this risk. *Note: Photosensitive epilepsy is relatively rare. It is estimated that less than five percent of those with epilepsy are photosensitive.*
- Because **hyperventilation can be a triggering mechanism** in seizure activity, the deep, fast breathing required of competitive or aggressive swimming may cause seizures. Therefore, appropriate **self-pacing techniques should be used.**
- **If on a boat, WEAR AN APPROVED LIFE JACKET or personal flotation device (pfd)** and practice safety and common sense before starting out—avoid the use of alcohol (which can trigger a seizure), drive at a safe speed if on a power boat, be aware of weather conditions, and don't go out alone.

It is important to know your body and your seizures! If you experience an aura let somebody know and get out of the water. Knowing your triggers allows you to avoid swimming when you are most at risk of having a seizure. For example if you have catamenial epilepsy you can avoid water sports at particular times of the month. Stress and anxiety are frequent triggers of seizure activity—avoid swimming/water when you are feeling anxious or stressed. It is also wise to stay away from water sports when you are changing medications until you know how your body will respond to the change.

A Seizure in the Water

*This information was provided by the Lifesaving Society of Canada
(www.lifesaving.ca)*

When an individual has a seizure in the pool, the life-guard's two concerns are that the person will stop breathing and that s/he will be physically hurt. Although any seizure experienced in or near water could be dangerous or even fatal, it is the tonic clonic (formerly called grand mal) seizure that causes the most concern. For this reason a short description of what *could* occur if a NON SUPERVISED swimmer experiences a tonic clonic seizure follows:

While in the *tonic* (rigid) phase the muscles contract, causing the body to lose its buoyancy and sink. When the *clonic* phase begins, the persons muscles contract and relax allowing the lungs to fill with water, causing the person to drown. This can occur in a few seconds and in just a few inches of water—whether a pool, lake, or bath tub.

It is very important that the rescuer get the person's head above water BEFORE the clonic phase begins. To accomplish this, the following technique should be used.

Arm's Length Head Support Rescue Method

- The rescuer approaches the person and places his/her hands under the person's chin from behind.
- While maintaining an arms length distance, the rescuer proceeds to move in a circle. The motion of the water will keep the body afloat.
- The rescuer *should not* remove the person from the water until after the seizure has finished. The water acts as a buffer and prevents any injury from occurring.

Should a person experience a seizure on the pool deck - remember to place something soft under the head and allow the seizure to take its course. Additional first aid guidelines are available from the Epilepsy Association of Calgary.

Remember, the lifeguards are there to help keep you safe. It is a good idea to inform them about your epilepsy. If you wear a Medical Alert bracelet the lifeguard has a responsibility to ask you about your condition. If you refuse to answer you could be refused entry.



Swim Safe!!

For Further Information Contact:

Your Physician or Healthcare Provider

The Lifesaving Society of Canada—www.lifesaving.ca

The Lifesaving Society of Alberta & NWT—www.lifesaving.org - look for WATER SMART Fact Sheets & Private Pool Safety Standards



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