

# exercise

Exercise improves fitness, energy, and mood, and relieves stress. Improving overall health and wellbeing in this way can help reduce seizures and the impact of epilepsy for some people. It can also help people feel more in control of their health.

### how can exercise help epilepsy?

Exercise helps people to stay fit and healthy. If you have epilepsy, this may help to reduce the number of seizures you have. Exercise can also improve mood and relieve stress. As stress is a common trigger for seizures, exercise may help to prevent seizures for some people.

Exercise releases 'feel good' hormones into the brain, helps to keep your muscles active, reduces fat levels in the body, and increases oxygen flow to your brain. It can also increase your bone density which can help to prevent osteoporosis (where bones become fragile and are more likely to break).

The NHS recommends exercise as one of the five steps to mental well-being. Being active may help you feel more positive and able to get the most from life.

 See further information at the end of this factsheet

### research in exercise and epilepsy

Research in the USA has shown that people with epilepsy exercise less than those without epilepsy.

A study in Norway of women with uncontrolled epilepsy showed that regular sessions of aerobic exercise (for example running, walking, swimming, cycling) for 60 minutes, twice a week, for 15 weeks resulted in a significant reduction in the number of seizures they had. They also had fewer muscle pains, sleep problems, and fatigue, and had lower cholesterol and better oxygen flow around the body.

Some specific diseases that are linked to a lack of exercise, poor diet, and being overweight include cardiovascular disease (which can lead to heart attacks and strokes), type 2 diabetes, hypertension (high blood pressure), osteoporosis, and certain cancers. A lack of exercise can also be linked to increases in depression and anxiety.

Studies show that people with epilepsy are at an increased risk of developing most of these conditions, so being active and maintaining a healthy diet can help your overall health.

### can I do exercise if I'm tired or ill?

You may not feel like doing exercise if you are 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 may worry about doing exercise in case they hurt themselves during a seizure. Research shows that, although seizures can happen during exercise, the positive effects of exercise may help to reduce seizures for some people with epilepsy.

### where do I start?

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.

- Warm up (see below).
- 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.
- Ask a friend to exercise with you or use a home fitness DVD. Make it as fun as possible.
- Keep a diary of how you feel after exercising.
- Give yourself credit every time you exercise – it can take determination and self-discipline.

### warming up and stretching

The NHS gives advice on how to warm up before exercising, and how to stretch after exercising. Stretching can also help relieve stress because it releases tension from your muscles, making you feel more relaxed.

 Visit [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/how-to-warm-up-before-exercising](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/how-to-warm-up-before-exercising) and [/how-to-stretch-after-exercising](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise/how-to-stretch-after-exercising)



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## what types of exercise can I do?

Exercise does not have to mean joining a gym or running in the park – walking is one of the easiest and safest exercises that most people can do. Gardening, or relaxing activities such as tai chi, are other great ways to exercise. The key is to find the exercise that feels right for you.

 Visit [nhs.uk/live-well/exercise](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise)

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.

Walking with a friend means they can help if you have a seizure. If you walk alone, ways to help you feel safer include using well-known routes, avoiding busy roads, and taking a mobile phone with you.

Some people with epilepsy choose to carry medical ID that tells other people how to help them if they have a seizure when out and about.

 Call our helpline for a free ID card.

## swimming

Swimming is great exercise, with the right safety precautions. If you 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. Some people swim during quieter swimming sessions so it is easier for the lifeguards to see them.

If you have a seizure in the water, lifeguards or a friend can support your head above the water, and gently tow you to a depth where they can stand up. They can then support you in the water until the seizure stops. If you are near the poolside, they may need to protect you from hitting the side and injuring yourself.

You may then need medical attention to check that you have not inhaled water during the seizure, even if you feel fine. It is also important for someone to stay with you afterwards and check that your breathing has returned to normal.

 See our leaflet *leisure* for more about water sports.

## team activities and contact sports

Team sports, or group activities such as walking or gardening groups, can also be a good way of increasing self-confidence and can be a way to make new friends and help with any feelings of isolation.

Most sports, including contact sports like football, hockey, basketball and rugby, have not shown to increase the chance of someone having a seizure, but 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 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.

 See our leaflets *leisure* and *first aid*.

## diet, energy and health

Even if you find it hard to do exercise, there are many ways that you can adapt your diet to help you to feel healthier, sleep better, and have more energy. This may in turn help you feel more like doing exercise.

 See our factsheet *diet and nutrition*.

## further information

### Epilepsy Society information

Diet and nutrition  
First aid  
Leisure  
ID card

### other organisations

#### NHS

 For more about five steps to mental wellbeing  
Visit [nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing)

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Registered charity number 206186

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[epilepsysociety.org.uk](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk)



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01494 601 400

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