

What is stress?



Everyone feels stress from time to time. It is a normal reaction to feeling under pressure or threatened in some way. Lots of things in everyday life can make you feel stress: money, work, and problems in our personal lives can cause feelings of stress.

Some stress can actually be a positive and motivational thing, such as nerves which can help you to perform better in exams.

Usually stress is short-lived and is not harmful. If you feel stressed for too long or if the stress is too intense, it can damage your physical and mental health.

Living with epilepsy can be frustrating and some people worry about losing control and having a seizure which can be stressful for them.

When is stress a problem?

Too much stress can affect your mood, body, and relationships. It can affect your confidence and may make you feel anxious and irritable.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/anxiety

Feeling stressed for a long time can also affect you physically, mentally, and emotionally. When you are in a threatening situation, your body produces 'stress hormones' to help you stay focused and deal with the harmful situation – the 'fight or flight response'. This can be positive and helpful. Once the threat is over, the stress hormones return to normal levels.

But, if you are feeling stressed all the time, the stress hormones stay at a high level and this can lead to heart problems, pain and high blood pressure and can make you more likely to develop infections.

Symptoms of stress

Stress affects people differently but some people may experience the following:

- feeling like you can't cope;
- having difficulty concentrating;
- feeling irritable, anxious, weepy, or scared a lot;
- lack of self-confidence;
- sleeping problems or feeling tired all the time;
- eating, drinking, or smoking more than usual;
- avoiding people;
- headaches, pain, or dizziness; or
- difficulty breathing normally.

Stress and epilepsy

Can stress cause epilepsy and seizures?

For some people, stress may be part of the reason that they develop epilepsy in the first place. Stress can cause issues with the development of the brain in young children. It can also change how the brain works if an adult experiences severe stress or stress over a long period of time.

Epilepsy is a condition where seizures start in the brain so it may not be surprising that there is a link between stress and developing epilepsy for some people. Your neurologist may ask about whether you have experienced long periods of stress when they make a diagnosis of epilepsy.

Some people who have epilepsy also find that stress can be a trigger for their seizures. You can discuss this with your neurologist and they may be able to suggest ways to manage your stress levels.

Can epilepsy cause stress?

Having a diagnosis of a long term health condition like epilepsy can, in itself, be stressful. It may take a while to come to terms with the diagnosis and some people may be stressed about how their life will be affected.

For some people, stress can be a trigger for their seizures and for others just having epilepsy can be stressful. This factsheet looks at the links between stress and epilepsy.

Helpline 01494 601400
Confidential, national call rate.
Information and emotional support.
Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/helpline
for opening hours.

The uncertainty about when a seizure might happen and the feeling of lack of control can be very stressful and frustrating for some people.

How you can help manage stress

Everyone deals with stress differently and stress does not make everyone ill or develop epilepsy. But if stress is affecting your health, or if it is a trigger for your seizures, there are things you can do to help manage it:

- Break up big tasks. Sometimes a task may seem overwhelming. You can make it feel more manageable by breaking it into smaller tasks and rewarding yourself as you complete each part.
- Plan ahead. Sometimes it can help to think things through in advance and make lists to ensure you are not going to forget anything.
- Eat a well-balanced diet. Everyone can benefit from eating a healthy, nutritious diet.
- Be more active. Exercise can help to use up nervous energy and may take the edge off stressful feelings.
- Challenge your thinking. Are things really as bad as you think? Try not to over-think things.
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink.
- Try to sleep well. You may feel more able to cope if you are well-rested.
- Do things you enjoy. Doing things that are fun can make you feel better and take your mind off whatever is worrying you.
- Try to relax. This may seem hard to do, but taking a break, even for a short while, can really help.
- Talk to someone and ask for support. This could be friends or family, or you could talk to our helpline (details above).
- Join a stress management course.
- Speak to your doctor about getting help.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/mental-health-epilepsy

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/wellbeing-and-epilepsy

Other sources of help

There are other sources of help if you feel the stress you are experiencing is affecting your daily life, or if it is becoming unmanageable. You can speak to your GP, neurologist, or epilepsy specialist nurse.

You can call NHS 111 or refer yourself to the NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies programme (IAPT).

You do not need a referral from your GP for this.

For information on IAPT and other 'talking' therapies, visit nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments

You can also call our confidential helpline to talk through how you are feeling.

Further information

NHS UK

nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-health-issues-stress/
For information about stress and how to cope with it.

Mind

mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/stress/what-is-stress
or call 0300 123 3393

For information about stress and finding help and support.

Epilepsy Society is grateful to Dr F J Rugg-Gunn, Consultant Neurologist & Honorary Associate Professor, Clinical Lead, Chalfont Centre for Epilepsy, who reviewed this information.

For a printed copy of this information contact our helpline.

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