

## Making choices about exercise and sport



Epilepsy is a very individual condition. How it affects you may be very different to how it affects someone else. Most people with epilepsy live full and active lives, enjoying exercise and doing the sports they want to.

If your seizures are controlled, you may not feel you need to put any safety measures in place. If your seizures are not controlled, there may be some simple measures to make an activity safer. For example, having someone with you who knows how to help if a seizure happens.

One way to think about safety is to do a risk assessment. This looks at what the possible risks are for anyone doing the activity, what the risks may be for you, and what can be done to make the activity safer.

[Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/safety-and-risk](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/safety-and-risk)

Understanding your own epilepsy can help you decide what type of exercise or sport 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.

### 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 and sport improve fitness, energy, and mood, and can help to relieve stress. Improving overall health and wellbeing in this way can help reduce seizures and the impact of epilepsy for some people.

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

[Visit nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing)

### Can I exercise if I'm tired or ill?

You may not feel like doing exercise if you are tired due to seizures or because of side effects from 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.

However, some research has shown that regular sessions of aerobic exercise (for example running, walking, swimming, or cycling) can result in a significant reduction in the number of seizures for some people, as well as having other health benefits. So being active and maintaining a healthy diet can help your overall health.

[Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/diet-and-nutrition](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/diet-and-nutrition)

### How do I start?

It can help to start with short, regular sessions of activity that feel manageable and become part of your daily routine. Some ideas to help you start, and keep going, with exercise include the following:

- Go for short walks 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 fluids and body salts.
- Do not exercise straight after a meal.

### 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.

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

Helpline 0300 102 0024  
Confidential, information, and emotional support.  
Visit [epilepsysociety.org.uk/helpline](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/helpline) for opening hours.

## What types of exercise or sport 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 forms of exercise that most people can do.

Walking with a friend means they can help if you have a seizure. If you walk alone, you may feel safer using well-known routes and taking a mobile phone with you. Some people carry medical ID that tells other people how to help them if they have a seizure.

**Call our helpline for a free ID card (details above).**

Relaxing activities such as tai chi or yoga are other great ways to exercise but extreme breathing techniques in yoga may need extra care. The key is to find the exercise or sport that feels right for you.

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

There are so many different sports and activities and it is important to assess the benefits and the possible risks for you. You may want to consider:

- talking to your GP or specialist about the risks;
- thinking about what may help to make the sport safer (for example, wearing a helmet when cycling, not walking or cycling near water or busy roads); or
- contacting the sport's governing body for information and advice on safety.

**[Visit sportengland.org/our-work/national-governing-bodies](https://www.sportengland.org/our-work/national-governing-bodies)**

### Water sports

Many water sports can be made safer with the right safety measures. This means considering what risk the activity involves, how your epilepsy affects you, what the risk would be if you were to have a seizure, and how you can make the activity safer.

Wearing a lifejacket is recommended for most water sports and it is important to have someone with you who knows how to help if you have a seizure, like a friend, coach, or instructor.

Be realistic about the possible risks for the sport you are considering. For example, there is an additional risk if you were to have a seizure and overturn while canoeing or kayaking.

Scuba diving is not recommended for people who have seizures, as having a seizure underwater can be life-threatening for the person with epilepsy and their diving buddy.

Swimming is great exercise, with the right safety precautions. You could speak to your doctor or epilepsy nurse about safety when swimming. It is a good idea to swim with someone who knows how to help you if you have a seizure in the water.

Swimming in a pool, where there is a lifeguard, is generally safer than swimming in the sea or open water. It is also easier for someone else to see if you have a seizure in a pool, especially at quieter times. You could tell the lifeguards at the pool how they can help you if you have a seizure.

**[Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/water-first-aid](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/water-first-aid)**

### Team activities and contact sports

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

**[Visit ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/wellbeing-walks-groups](https://www.ramblers.org.uk/go-walking/wellbeing-walks-groups)**

Most sports, including contact sports like football, hockey, basketball, and rugby, have not been 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 may help them to help you if you have a seizure.

**[Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/first-aid-epileptic-seizures](https://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/first-aid-epileptic-seizures)**

### Extreme sports and adventure sports

Activities like bungee jumping, hang gliding, climbing, abseiling, winter sports, and whitewater rafting have high levels of excitement, skill, and danger. You could talk to your doctor and the sport's governing body about whether these types of activities are safe for you.

Every effort is made to ensure that all information is correct at the time of publishing. Please note that information is intended for a UK audience. This information is not a substitute for advice from your own doctors. Epilepsy Society is not responsible for any actions taken as a result of using this information.



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## Combat sports

Boxing or martial art sports that involve blows to the head are not recommended for people with epilepsy due to the high risk of head injury.

## Horse riding

It is recommended that everyone wears an approved British Horse Society (BHS) riding hat for horse riding. If you have seizures, it is also recommended that you ride with someone who knows what to do if you have a seizure. Riding for the Disabled Association (RDA) has local groups around the UK and can offer special facilities for people with disabilities.

[Visit rda.org.uk](http://rda.org.uk)

## Equality Act 2010

People with epilepsy are protected under the Equality Act 2010, which gives rights to use leisure facilities. Leisure providers may need to make adjustments to make a service more user-friendly. If you have specific needs you can talk to the leisure organisation to see how they can help.

[Visit equalityhumanrights.com](http://equalityhumanrights.com)

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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