

Stress and Epilepsy

What is stress?

Stress is caused by a demand on your physical or mental energy.

Many events in your life can be a source of stress such as changing jobs, moving and going through a loss. Every day issues such as driving in rush hour, conflicts with family members or dealing with long line-ups can also cause stress.

Your thoughts about these events determine how you react and create the level of stress you feel. If you usually respond to life's events in a negative way, your health and happiness may suffer.

Stress is not so much what happens to you, but how you respond to a situation or event.

Since everyone has stress, it is important to learn how to recognize and manage it. Although some medications may help control your response to stress, there are many skills you can learn as well. These are described in this handout.

Does stress trigger seizures?

It is hard to know exactly how stress can trigger seizures, since how we respond to stress is different for everyone. It's also hard to judge how much of an effect stress has on a person.

Some studies show that major life stressors, either good or bad, could affect seizures. Others show that a build up of 'daily hassles' or stress seems to be more important. Since people are very different, it's likely that stress can affect people in different ways at different times of their life.

How does stress trigger seizures?

We are not sure how stress may trigger a seizure. Stress is an expected and unavoidable part of life. It is our body's reaction to any change that involves a physical and emotional response. Stress is known to cause worry, feelings of depression, irritability and even anger. Stress affects people in many different ways.

Important things to consider:



Important
Information

- Stress causes our bodies to release certain hormones that can affect areas of the brain involved in some types of seizures. For example, partial seizures occur in the same areas of the brain involved in emotions and responding to stress.
- Stress can cause sleep disturbances, which may also be a seizure trigger.
- Chronic stress can lead to anxiety or depression. Sleep problems are symptoms of these mood problems. Being anxious and depressed can also worsen stress, causing a vicious cycle with more seizures and mood problems.

What can I do to manage stress and prevent seizures?

While there is no proof that reducing stress helps seizures, a recent study showed that nearly 9 in 10 people who actively managed their stress believed it reduced their risk of seizures. Common sense tells us that if something is bothering you, see what you can do to avoid it or make it better.

Managing stress is very personal and specific to your situation. However, there are some things you can do to reduce stress:

- **Use a diary** to write down and keep track of what causes stress for you.
- When a stressful situation is unavoidable, do your best to **get enough sleep** and take your seizure medications on time.
- Find ways to **diffuse a situation**. Avoid people who cause you to be angry and anxious if you can. Try to approach them differently – it may help calm down the stressful situation.
- **Exercise regularly.**
- **Do your best to relax.**
- **Keep to a daily routine.** Pace yourself and take frequent breaks.
- **Set priorities** for what is important in your life and let the rest go.
- **Seek help.** Talk to your doctor, nurse or social worker. Let them know what is bothering you:
 - Make sure the epilepsy team knows that stress is affecting your seizures.
 - Seek counseling or psychotherapy. If you think you may have anxiety or depression, talk to you doctor about treatment options.
 - Join a support group

