



Epilepsy and swimming

This fact sheet covers how you are able to participate in swimming and other disciplines, if you are living with epilepsy.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a disorder of brain function that takes the form of recurring seizures and affects 0.5-1 per cent of the population. This means having a swimmer in a training squad or swimming lesson will be quite common.

A seizure occurs when sudden uncontrolled bursts of electrical activity disrupt normal electrical impulses that control brain function.

The seizures are regarded as partial, with no loss of consciousness or generalised, when consciousness is lost. The duration can vary from absences lasting a few seconds to several minutes. Generalised tonic clonic fits occur with loss of consciousness and muscular jerks. Temporal lobe epilepsy often starts with funny smells or tastes before a generalised seizure.

What you need to know about epilepsy and swimming

- Swimming as a recreational sport is to be encouraged for people living with epilepsy provided certain sensible safety precautions are undertaken. Seizures during swimming are actually rare and more likely to happen within three hours after exercise when blood sugars are low.
- There is some evidence in addition to the feeling of well-being and fitness that regular swimming may improve epileptic control. There are specific benefits to sufferers increasing social integration and reducing any stigma.
- After diagnosis, clearance from your doctor is advisable before starting the sport.
- It is very important that swimming is never undertaken alone and that a competent and appropriately trained observer is present with you. The lifeguard, coach or teacher must be aware of your condition and knows what to do in the event of a seizure. They must know how to get you out of the water and have appropriate first aid training and equipment at the pool.
- Special care is necessary if you have changed medication, haven't been taking it regularly, or your epilepsy is poorly controlled. In such cases stop swimming until medical approval is obtained.
- Some swimmers with epilepsy will recognise warning symptoms when they are about to have a seizure. If you experience these, you should move immediately to the edge of the pool and seek attention.
- Some will be aware of the specific triggers of their epilepsy such as cold water or flashing lights which should be avoided.

Tips for swimming with epilepsy

Do:

- swim in an outside lane
- have a competent observer with you at all times
- wear a coloured swimming cap so you can be easily identified
- ensure when you're training that blood sugar doesn't drop by drinking regular glucose drinks and avoid dehydration.

Avoid:

- very busy public sessions.
- swimming training if you're overly tired, stressed or suffering from an intercurrent infection with fever. Sudden immersion into cold water could increase your chances of having a seizure

Don't:

- over-exert beyond your limits.

Be aware:

- of and avoid shimmering sunlight across the pool surface or flashing lights which may precipitate a seizure.

Specific tips for other disciplines with epilepsy

For all disciplines, make sure you **do** have a competent observer at all times.

Synchronised swimming:

- **Avoid:** strobe lighting effects.
- **Avoid:** deliberate hyper-ventilation before a sequence.

Diving:

- **Avoid:** diving above 1.0 metre height.

Open water swimming:

- **Be aware:** this carries the additional risks of colder water temperatures, deeper water with currents and tides which might make continual observation and retrieval difficult.

Additional advice

This can come from your GP, neurologist, specialist epilepsy nurse and the epilepsy Society-helpline 01494 601 400

Further information on epilepsy: www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/