



EPILEPSY AND THE ELDERLY

Of the total population who are diagnosed with epilepsy for the first time, only 2% are elderly people. The physical changes related with ageing are most likely the cause of epilepsy.

Causes of epilepsy in older people

Epilepsy in an elderly person could be the return of a seizure disorder that was in remission for many years
Strokes can cause seizures because of damage to the brain itself.
Diseases such as heart attacks and Alzheimer’s can cause changes to the brain that may lead to seizures
Diseases of the kidneys, liver and even diabetes may cause epilepsy later in life
Alcohol or alcoholism can trigger seizures or latent epilepsy
Brain tumors of any kind
Posttraumatic and postoperative traumas
Surgery on the brain can leave a scar that may cause seizures
Positive history of epilepsy
Physical changes of old age
Multiple sclerosis
Meningitis
Narrow or clogged arteries

Epilepsy and the process of aging

Mental alertness, mood changes and memory loss can be caused by several health problems associated with ageing. There may also be other explanations for the change of behavior of the elderly person:

Toxicity

The therapeutic levels of anti-convulsant medication need to be monitored through regular blood tests. If the levels are too high it could cause toxicity. This could in turn manifest as dizziness and confusion.

Drug Interaction

The elderly person is most likely taking a variety of medication for different medical reasons. These drugs can interact and produce negative side effects. It is therefore of the utmost importance to discuss possible drug interaction with the person’s doctor and/or pharmacist.

Sensitivity

A negative reaction to drugs may result in depression, agitation, confusion or loss of memory. Monitor any changes in sleeping patterns. It is possible that the person is sensitive to a specific drug. Consult with the doctor and never change or stop medication without the doctor’s advice.

The social impact of epilepsy and the elderly

- An elderly person may feel useless and of little value to their fellow man. Loneliness and other physical changes can cause depression. This is even worse for the elderly person with epilepsy. The person may not be able to live independently or drive a vehicle any longer and this can cause depression.
- The elderly person has a higher risk of sustaining head injuries or fractures.
- They may feel as if they have lost control over their own lives and feel uncertain about their future.
- The elderly person with epilepsy can become socially isolated.
- The first seizure is a very traumatic experience with far reaching social consequences.
- If the person does not experience an aura (a warning sensation that occurs prior to a seizure) the person will need to adjust accordingly.

Medication

Memory problems often affect people with epilepsy. Epilepsy medicine works best when blood levels remain steady. The correct dosage must be taken at specific



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times to maintain blood levels and to be of therapeutic value.

It can be hard to keep track of when to drink what medication.

- A pillbox/dispenser divided into segments according to the time and day is useful and obtainable from most chemists. If not available ask your chemist to order one for you.
- Pills can also be packed in sachets marked with the specific hour of the day and day of the week. A friend or family member can pack this if the person has difficulty in packing their own medication.
- A wristwatch or cell phone with an alarm can be helpful to remind someone to take their medication.
- Ask a friend or family member to assist in keeping track of reordering dates and mark the calendar accordingly.

Do's and Don'ts

Remember fire, heat and water are dangerous to any person with epilepsy.
The safest ways to cook food is in a microwave or ask somebody to assist with cooking.
Avoid carrying hot dishes or boiling water in a kettle.
Set the water temperature on the geyser lower to prevent the water from burning you.
Avoid ironing if at all possible
Keep bath water levels low to prevent drowning. If possible shower instead.
Wear rubber gloves when handling or washing glassware.
Place a screen in front of open fires and do not carry hot ashes.
If possible avoid living in a house or flat with stairs. You may sustain an injury while having a seizure.
Carpeted floors and padded furniture provide more protection.
Protective padding can be used around sharp corners of tables to prevent injury.
Keep in touch with family or friends with beepers and/or portable phones.
A medic Alert bracelet can be useful to identify a person while having a seizure and enable the public to be of assistance.