Epilepsy and sleep

Did you know that sleep and epilepsy can affect each other?

Developing some healthy habits around sleep is a great way to manage your epilepsy and feel rested.

Sleep is important for everyone's health and well-being. It helps your brain work properly and assists in learning, problem-solving, memory and attention.

If you have epilepsy, getting enough good quality sleep is important, as it can help you manage your seizures.

The relationship between sleep and seizures

Sleep and seizures have a complicated relationship. Not getting enough sleep is a common seizure trigger, and your epilepsy will probably be harder to manage if you are tired or sleep-deprived.

Taking the time to think about your sleep habits and how they may be improved is a great way to stay on top of your seizure management. This includes being aware of how much sleep you are getting and whether it is good quality.

If you are experiencing sleep problems, have a chat with your neurologist or GP. You might also like to start a sleep diary to identify how much sleep you are getting and what impacts your sleep.

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Things that affect sleep

Your sleep can be affected by many things, including:

- caffeine, sugar and nicotine
- electronic devices such as TVs, tablets and smartphones; these often emit a blue light that can interfere with your natural wake/sleep cycle
- stress, anxiety and depression
- medications, including Anti-Seizure Medications (ASMs)
- work schedules, especially shift work
- sleep disorders
- some forms of epilepsy where seizures only occur during sleep or when waking up.

Sleep disorders

Sleep disorders are conditions that cause recurring problems with sleep. Examples include obstructive sleep apnoea, sleepwalking, nocturnal panic disorder, restless leg syndrome and parasomnias.

Most sleep disorders will impact the quantity and quality of your sleep. Many sleep disorders can mimic the symptoms of a seizure and may be overlooked by medical practitioners.

Obstructive sleep apnoea

Obstructive sleep apnoea is a common sleep disorder. If you have epilepsy, you are statistically more likely to have sleep apnoea. Sleep apnoea happens when muscles in your throat relax while you sleep. This blocks off your airway and causes you to stop breathing until your brain notices what is happening and wakes you up. Sleep apnoea can lead to low blood oxygen levels and frequent sleep disruption. Both of these issues can increase the number of seizures that you have.

Some evidence suggests that Anti-Seizure Medication (ASM) can make sleep apnoea worse. It is also thought that sleep apnoea treatment may help improve seizure control. Sleep apnoea treatments include:

- weight loss
- CPAP machines
- oral appliances (mandibular advancement splint)
- surgery.

Tips for getting a good night's sleep

Some sleep problems are a result of bad habits. It is hard to fix sleeping problems quickly, but things should improve if you persevere with healthy sleep choices. You may need to experiment with different sleep strategies to find out what works best for you. Above all, try not to obsess about your sleep, as this can make things worse.

Understand how much sleep you need

The amount of sleep you need changes as you age. The National Sleep Foundation recently published new sleep guidelines suggesting that adults between the ages of 25 and 63 require seven to nine hours of sleep each night. In comparison, those over 65 require seven to eight hours of sleep.

Listen to your body clock

While guidelines are helpful, it is important to listen to your body. You may need more or less sleep than the guidelines recommend.

- Try to spend some daytime outdoors. This helps synchronise your body clock (circadian rhythm), which is important in promoting sleep.
- Do not go to bed if you are not sleepy.
- Do not stay in bed if you are awake and cannot fall asleep. If you cannot fall asleep and are getting frustrated, get up, leave the room and do something boring to take your mind off trying to get to sleep.

Ensure your bedroom is conducive to sleep – review your bedroom and ask yourself if it is comfortable.

- Think about temperature, sounds, lights and the comfort of your bed. Your bedroom should be quiet, cool and dark. If it is not, try to make changes so that it is.
- Only use your bed for sleep. This builds an association of sleep with your bed which can help with falling and remaining asleep.

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Avoid stimulants and drugs.

- Avoid caffeine in the evening and opt for something like a hot cup of milk.
- Give up smoking. Nicotine in cigarettes is a stimulant that contributes to sleep loss.

Develop a sleep routine.

- Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. This helps to keep your body clock on track.
- Settle your body and mind before bed.
- Limit the use of electronic devices such as TV's and smartphones. Try to switch off an hour before sleep.
- Be as relaxed as possible before going to sleep.

General lifestyle tips

- Get regular exercise but avoid exercising right before bed as this makes it difficult to fall asleep.
- Avoid working night shifts as sleep disruption can trigger seizures.
- If you know you will have a late night, try to nap earlier in the day.
- Talk to your doctor if you have trouble sleeping or experiencing changes in your mood or stress levels.

Other resources

- **The Sleep Health Foundation**
  Web: www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/fact-sheets.html
- **Epilepsy Smart**
  Web: www.epilepsysmart.org.au

Epilepsy support

The National Epilepsy Support Service (NESS) is available Mon – Sat, 9:00am – 7:00pm (AEST) to provide support and information across Australia. Phone: 1300 761 487. Email: support@epilepsysmart.org.au

Lived experience

We recognise all people living with epilepsy and the impact it has on their lives. We take a moment to acknowledge the lived experience they have shared with us. In sharing their stories, we acknowledge the strength and resilience people living with epilepsy have shown in the face of not getting a fair go.

A medical note

The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from a qualified health professional.

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