Planning for pregnancy with epilepsy

Planning for pregnancy can be an exciting time. If you are planning to have a baby, talk to your neurologist before you try to conceive. The dosage of your anti-seizure medications (ASM) may need to be adjusted. You may also need to take extra precautions to keep yourself and your baby healthy.

Talking to your neurologist before you conceive can help you to have a successful pregnancy.

Planning is important

Most women (93%) with epilepsy who want to get pregnant, have successful pregnancies and healthy babies. Some ASMs can increase the risk of complications during pregnancy. Your neurologist can help you put a management plan in place to help keep you and your baby safe during pregnancy. Be sure to talk to your neurologist as soon as you decide that you would like to have a baby.

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Risks to consider

If you have epilepsy, you have a slightly higher risk of experiencing complications during pregnancy. Understanding these risks and implementing a plan to manage them should be part of your pregnancy planning. Some of the main risks include:

- 25-30% of women experience an increased number of seizures during pregnancy, especially in the third trimester.
- Tonic-clonic seizures may cause harm and injury to the pregnant woman and their foetus if not managed adequately.
- Some ASMs can increase the risk of congenital malformation and disabilities; however, this increased risk is small. Overall, these occur in 4-6% of women taking ASMs compared to 2-3% in the general population.
- There have not been any significant findings to suggest that ASMs increase the likelihood of miscarriage or stillbirth; however, research in the area is limited.

Managing these risks

Visiting your neurologist before conception is the best way to manage the risks of pregnancy. In this appointment, your doctor may consider the following issues:

- Do you have the correct epilepsy diagnosis?
- Are your seizures well managed?
- Are you on the lowest possible dose of medication for controlling your seizures?
- Does your medication need to change before conception?

It is vital to have the best possible seizure control and be on the safest ASM before becoming pregnant. Abnormalities caused by ASMs may occur during the first three months of pregnancy. Increased seizures, especially tonic-clonic seizures, are more likely to harm your developing baby during the last three months of pregnancy.

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Risk management before conception

When planning pregnancy, you must continue to take your ASMs. Your doctor may recommend that you change the dose or type of ASM before you conceive, as some medications are safer for the foetus than others.

Your doctor may also encourage you to start taking folic acid before you try to conceive. This can reduce the risk of congenital abnormalities that are more likely to affect the babies of women with epilepsy.

Risk management throughout pregnancy

Your doctor may encourage you to manage the risks associated with your pregnancy by doing the following:

- having regular visits with your neurologist and obstetrician throughout your pregnancy
- continuing to take folic acid as prescribed by your doctor
- reporting any changes to your seizure control to your doctor
- monitoring your ASMs to ensure they are appropriate.

Outlook

Most women with epilepsy have successful pregnancies and healthy babies. Understanding the risks of pregnancy and epilepsy can help you better manage them.

Other resources

The **Australian Pregnancy Register for Women on ASMs** can enrol you on their register if you are pregnant and interested in participating in research about these issues.

Phone: 1800 069 772
Web: www.neuroscience.org.au/australian-epilepsy-pregnancy-register

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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