
Swimming with epilepsy



Swimming is a great way to maintain your physical health and mental wellbeing; however, it can be hazardous for some people with epilepsy. If you have epilepsy, it is important to understand your risk and take precautions when swimming or engaging in water-based activities.

Many people with epilepsy find that by putting in place the right safety measures, they can enjoy the positive health benefits of swimming.



Swimming and risk

Swimming can be risky for some people with epilepsy. To determine whether swimming is right for you, it is important to consider your swimming ability, health status, and where you will be swimming.

Many people with epilepsy find that by putting in place the right safety measures, they can enjoy the positive health benefits of swimming. Swimming safely not only reduces your risk of harm, it can also increase your confidence.



What to do before you swim

- 1. Understand where you will be swimming.** Understanding the swimming conditions will allow you to appreciate any special risks and avoid them. Be sure to understand the details around where you will be swimming ahead of time. Will you be indoors or outdoors? In a pool or open water?
- 2. Talk to your doctor.** Before you agree to participate in a water-based activity, talk to your doctor about reducing risk.
- 3. Find someone to supervise.** Swimming without supervision is risky, especially if you have epilepsy. Before you enjoy your swim or water activity, make sure that someone with appropriate water safety and lifesaving skills is available to supervise.
- 4. Take your medication.** Make sure that you have taken your Anti-Seizure Medications (ASMs) before you swim. If you have not been taking them regularly, or have recently missed a dose, do not swim.

Water safety tips

If you or someone in your care has epilepsy, it is a good idea to follow these water safety tips:

- Never swim or participate in water activities alone.
- Tell the lifeguard on duty about your epilepsy and any relevant health conditions before entering the water.
- Never swim if you have not taken your ASMs, or are intoxicated or sleep-deprived.
- Always swim and participate in water sports that are within your limits.
- Ensure you have someone actively supervising your swimming who keeps an eye on your wellbeing at all times. This person should:
 - Understand your epilepsy and any other relevant health conditions, and have a copy of your Epilepsy Management Plan.
 - Be a strong swimmer and know how to intervene if necessary.
 - Know how to respond in the event of a seizure and can call 000 if needed.



- If you have experienced uncontrolled seizures in the past:
 - Always have a minimum of 1:1 active supervision in and around the water.
 - Ensure the active supervisor is in the water and stays within arm's reach. In some instances, additional supervision may be needed.
 - Consider the use of a flotation device or life jacket.

Other water activities

Underwater swimming and extreme water sports are usually not recommended for people with epilepsy due to the high level of risk. If the water environment is unsafe or supervision levels are inadequate, do not swim or participate in the water activity.

School programs

Each state and territory have specific education department guidelines around school swimming programs. Before planning or agreeing to any school-based swimming activities, read these and assess individual risk.

What to do if a generalised Tonic-clonic seizure occurs in the water

The person supervising your swimming or water activity needs to know what to do if a generalised Tonic-clonic seizure happens in the water. The current recommendations for this are:

- Support the person with epilepsy by keeping their head out of the water.
- Check that their airway is kept clear.
- Remove the person from the water once their active seizure movements have ceased.
- If one seizure quickly follows another or their active movements do not cease, remove the person from the water as safely and as quickly as possible. This may require the assistance of others. In some instances, it is beneficial to remove the person from the water at the shallowest part of the pool.

- In open water environments where it is difficult to keep the person's airway clear, remove the person from the water as soon as it is safely possible to do so.
- If a convulsive seizure occurs in water, check if they are breathing, and dial 000 immediately.
- Commence CPR if they are not breathing.
- If breathing, move into the recovery position once active movements have ceased.
- Do not restrain and do not put anything in the mouth of someone having a convulsive seizure.

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.

CALL 000 FOR AN AMBULANCE IF:

- You do not know the person or if there is no epilepsy management plan.
- If the seizure lasts for 5 minutes or more.
- If the seizure stops, but the person does not regain consciousness within 5 minutes.
- If another seizure begins.
- When a serious injury has occurred.
- If the seizure occurs in water.
- If you believe the person is pregnant.

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Epilepsy Smart Australia Program

National Epilepsy Support Service 1300 761 487

Website epilepsysmart.org.au



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