



Epilepsy and swimming

This fact sheet is full of information, tips and advice about how you can help an individual participate in swimming and other disciplines, if living with epilepsy.

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a disorder of brain function that takes the form of recurring seizures and affects 9 in every 1000 people in the UK. 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.

Seizures can be classed as partial - when there is 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 swimmers 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 rare and are more likely to happen within three hours after a swim when blood sugars might be 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 people with epilepsy, such as increasing social integration and reducing any stigma.
- After diagnosis, checking with a doctor is advisable before starting swimming.
- It is very important that swimming is never undertaken alone and that a competent and appropriately trained observer is present. The lifeguard, coach or teacher must be aware of the swimmer's condition and know what to do if someone has a seizure in the water. They can help by supporting the head above the water and gently towing the person to a depth where they can stand or to the poolside.
- Special care is necessary if there has been a recent change in medication, compliance issues, or poorly controlled epilepsy. In such cases a temporary stop in swimming would be important until medical approval is obtained.
- Some swimmers with epilepsy will recognise warning symptoms when they are about to have a seizure. If they experience these, they 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 participants swimming with epilepsy

These tips are for swimmer's who want to take part in swimming if living with epilepsy.

Do:

- swim in an outside lane
- have a competent observer present at all times
- wear a coloured swimming cap so they can be easily identified
- prevent blood sugar decreasing and dehydration by encouraging intake of regular glucose drinks.

Avoid:

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

Don't:

- over-exert beyond their limits.

Be aware:

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

Tips for participants in other aquatic activities with epilepsy

For all activities, make sure the participant **does** have a competent observer at all times.

Artistic 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.

- **Be aware:** someone having a tonic seizure may expel the air from their lungs and sink, quickly disappearing from the view of others, particularly in murky water. It is advisable to have a helper on or in the water and if in the water, to make sure the water level is no higher than the helper's shoulders.

Additional advice

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

epilepsy: epilepsysociety.org.uk/