



# 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 0.5-1 per cent of the population. 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.

The seizures are regarded as partial, with 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 more likely to happen within three hours after exercise when blood sugars are 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 sufferers increasing social integration and reducing any stigma.
- After diagnosis, clearance from a swimmer's doctor is advisable before starting the sport.
- 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 knows what to do in the event of a seizure. They must know how to get the swimmer out of the water and have appropriate first aid training and equipment at the pool.
- 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 the sport 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
- ensure when training that their blood sugar doesn't drop by drinking regular glucose drinks and avoid dehydration.

### 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 disciplines with epilepsy

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

### Synchronised 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.

## Tips for operators, coaches or persons accompanying swimmer

- If someone starts having a seizure in water, support the person by tilting their head so the face and head stay above the surface.
- Remove the person from the water once the active movements of the seizure have ceased.
- Place them on their side to recover.
- Be calm and reassuring.

## Additional advice

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

**epilepsy:** [www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/](http://www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/)