Women with Epilepsy

Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes people to have recurring seizures. The seizures happen when clusters of nerve cells, called neurons, in the brain send out the wrong signals. Epilepsy affects both men and women, but there are some special concerns for women.

Health and wellness

Seizures can affect daily living, self-esteem and freedom in daily activities. Talk to your doctor if you have depression, trouble sleeping, trouble eating or functioning. A referral for personal and/or family counseling may help to address quality of life issues. Seek out support groups to share experiences, frustrations and tips on how to cope with seizures.

Birth control

All methods of birth control can safely be used by women with epilepsy. These include:

- **Hormonal methods of birth control**, such as birth control pills, skin patch, injection, implant, vaginal ring and hormonal intrauterine device (IUD)
- **Nonhormonal methods of birth control**, such as copper intrauterine device (IUD) and barrier methods of birth control, like condoms, diaphragms and spermicides

Talk to your doctor about the seizure medicines you take and your choice for birth control. Some seizure medicines may make hormonal methods of birth control, like birth control pills, less effective, and some types of birth control may make your seizure medicines less effective. If you take any of the below medicines, talk to your doctor about the best method of birth control to use:

- Carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- Lamotrigine (Lamictal)
- Oxcarbazepine (Trileptal)
- Phenytoin (Dilantin)
- Topiramate (Qudexy XR, Topamax, Trokendi XR) (more than 200 mg)

Pregnancy

Talk to your doctors before you get pregnant to learn the health risks with your type of epilepsy and the medicines you are taking. You and your doctor can then create a plan to ensure a healthy pregnancy for you and your baby. About 90% of women who are seizure free before pregnancy will remain seizure free during pregnancy.
To prepare for a healthy pregnancy:

- Your doctor will prescribe the safest seizure medicine and dose for you and your baby. **Take your seizure medicines as prescribed.** Do NOT stop taking your medicines. Uncontrolled seizures are dangerous for you and your baby because of the risk of falls and low oxygen. **If you have a seizure, tell your doctor as soon as possible.**
- **Take a prenatal vitamin with 400 micrograms (mcg) of folic acid at least 1 month before you get pregnant.** Folic acid reduces the risk of some birth defects.
- **Talk to your neurologist.** He or she may order some baseline lab work.

During pregnancy:

- **Take a prenatal vitamin with folic acid.**
- Get plenty of sleep.
- **Go to all prenatal health visits.** These visits let your doctor find health problems early.
- Your doctor may check your blood levels of seizure medicines monthly and adjust your doses as needed.
- Follow-up with your neurologist on a regular basis.
- Avoid tobacco, caffeine, alcohol and illegal drugs.
- Try to avoid stress.

After delivery (postpartum):

Talk to your doctor about a postpartum plan. It is common for seizure medicines to be adjusted again postpartum if your dose was altered during pregnancy.

**Breastfeeding**

**Talk to your doctor about your medicines and breastfeeding.** For most women with epilepsy, breastfeeding is a safe and beneficial choice.

Only small amounts of seizure medicines are secreted in breast milk, often much less than the baby was exposed to in the womb. Work with your baby’s doctor and a lactation consultant to meet your baby’s nutritional needs.

**Continue to take a prenatal vitamin while breastfeeding.**

**Risk of seizures in the child**

The risk that your child will develop epilepsy is only about 5 percent unless you have a clear hereditary form of epilepsy. If you are worried that your epilepsy is a hereditary form, ask to speak with a genetic counselor.
Menopause

Your seizure medicine and dose may need to change as you age.

Some seizure medicines can cause mineral loss from bone. This can result in bone loss called osteoporosis and bone fractures. These medicines include:

- Carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- Oxcarbazepine (Trileptal)
- Phenobarbital
- Phenytoin (Dilantin)
- Primidone (Mysoline)

To prevent bone loss:

- Eat a diet high in calcium and vitamin D and take a multivitamin.
- Do weight-bearing exercises, such as walking, dancing, tennis and weight training.
- Avoid alcohol and smoking.
- Discuss use of hormone replacement therapy with your doctor.

For more information, visit these websites

- Epilepsy Foundation at [www.epilepsy.com](http://www.epilepsy.com)
- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke. Epilepsy Information Page at [www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Epilepsy-Information-Page](http://www.ninds.nih.gov/Disorders/All-Disorders/Epilepsy-Information-Page)