

Women with Epilepsy



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

WEXNER MEDICAL CENTER

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

Women of child-bearing years who take seizure medicines need to take a daily folic acid supplement. Folic acid reduces the risk of some birth defects should an unplanned pregnancy occur.

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.

Pregnancy

Over 90 percent of women with epilepsy have normal, healthy babies. **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.

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.**

- **Begin taking prenatal vitamins with folic acid at least 1 month before you get pregnant.** Folic acid reduces the risk of some birth defects.

During pregnancy:

- **Take prenatal vitamins 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 and adjust your doses as needed.
- **Avoid tobacco, caffeine, alcohol and illegal drugs.**
- **Try to avoid stress.**
- **Talk to your doctor about taking vitamin K supplements after 34 weeks of pregnancy.** This may reduce the risk of a blood-clotting disorder in babies from exposure to certain seizure medicines.

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.

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 your prenatal vitamins while breastfeeding.

Birth control

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

- Intrauterine devices (IUD)
- Hormone implants
- Hormone injections
- Condoms
- Birth control pills
- Diaphragms

Talk to your doctor about your medicines, and your choice for birth control. Some seizure medicines may make **birth control pills** less effective. This could result in an unplanned pregnancy. If you take any of the medicines below, talk to your doctor about changing your method of birth control:

- Phenytoin (Dilantin)
- Carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- Topiramate (Topamax, Topiragen, Trokendi XR) (more than 200mg)
- Oxcarbazepine (Triletal)

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:

- Phenytoin (Dilantin)
- Carbamazepine (Tegretol)
- Phenobarbital (Luminal)
- Primidone (Mysoline)
- Divalporex (Depakote)

To prevent bone loss:

- Eat a diet high in calcium and vitamin D.
- 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

- Patient Education handout "Seizures"
- Epilepsy Foundation, www.epilepsyfoundation.org
- National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, www.ninds.nih.gov

Talk to your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

The Library for Health Information is available to help you find more health information at (614) 293-3707 or e-mail: health-info@osu.edu.