

Medications to control seizures are called antiseizure medications (ASMs). These medications are not a cure for epilepsy; they are to control or reduce seizures. Medication is generally the first treatment option for seizures.

Choice of medication

The ASM chosen for you will firstly depend on your type of epilepsy, as some medications work better for certain types of epilepsies. The neurologist will also consider your age, gender, possible medication side effects, desire to have children, employment, and lifestyle, and many other individual factors.

Starting medication

Medication is usually started slowly, gradually building the dose over days or weeks, depending on the medication. This “start low, go slow” is a common approach. During this time, its effect should be closely monitored. When seizures are greatly reduced or stop, with minimal side effects – the dose can be stabilised. If the medication does not work well, a second medication may be added (and the first may be gradually withdrawn). Some people may need to try more than one medication before getting the best seizure control.

In children, medication is usually calculated by body weight and sometimes as a child grows, seizures may occur. This doesn't mean the medication has stopped working or the seizures are getting worse. It may simply mean the medication needs adjusting because the dose isn't high enough for their body weight anymore.



Many people with epilepsy achieve seizure control with one medication. However, for some, more than one medication will be needed.

How long do I need to take the epilepsy medication?

This varies from person to person and depends on several factors including:

- the type of epilepsy or syndrome
- how the seizures have responded to the medication
- the length of time seizure-free
- the likelihood of the seizures recurring
- side effects of the medication
- other medical conditions or medications the person may have
- social factors for example; driving and employment.

For some, treatment is life-long, whilst others may “grow out” of their epilepsy or have a remission from seizures.



Stopping medication

Any withdrawal from medication should be done *slowly* and always under the advice and supervision of the prescribing doctor.

Suddenly stopping medication can provoke a seizure and possibly a medical emergency

Unwanted effects

Unwanted effects or side-effects, often occur when starting a medication. They should lessen or disappear after the first few weeks of treatment, but you should inform your GP or the prescribing doctor if the side-effects persist, are intolerable or are listed as serious. In these cases, the medication dose may be lowered or withdrawn, and the unwanted symptoms will usually resolve.

Some ASMs can reduce the effectiveness of hormonal contraceptives and some hormonal contraceptives can affect the uptake and absorption of some ASMs. This may mean that the type or dose of a contraception may need to be changed.

Some ASMs are known to have a higher risk of causing birth defects, so women planning a pregnancy, should plan well ahead and discuss medication choice with the neurologist.

All known unwanted effects are listed in the manufacturer's product information sheets. Ask your pharmacist for one or search the TGA [here](#).

Some common unwanted side effects of ASM's include:

- Poor coordination and balance, dizziness and unsteadiness
- Poor concentration, brain fog
- Drowsiness, fatigue
- Visual problems – blurred or double vision
- Speech problems
- Stomach upsets - nausea, vomiting,
- Weight gain or loss
- Mood changes such as depression, anxiety, aggressiveness

Medication blood level monitoring

If someone has good seizure control with few or no medication side effects, blood level monitoring is not usually necessary. There are some situations where it is needed such as when someone is:

- taking phenytoin (Dilantin)
- having more seizures than usual or changes in seizures or seizure control
- taking many medications, or have another medical condition that requires monitoring
- a young child, elderly or disabled
- having what are thought to be unwanted side-effects



Staying with the same brand

There can be many different names for the same medication. Once seizures are controlled with a medication it is important to avoid changing brands as there is a small risk of “breakthrough” seizures for some people. If you have a medication that works, do not change brands even if the pharmacist suggests it.

Taking antiseizure medication regularly as prescribed is crucial to controlling seizures. Changing doses may provoke unwanted effects and seizures

Missing doses

Missing a medication dose is a common cause of breakthrough seizures. Missed medication can trigger seizures in people with both well-controlled and poorly controlled epilepsy.

It's very individual, but if only one dose is missed, the chances of having a seizure may be only slightly higher. However, missing one dose is more likely to cause seizures if someone is only taking a once-a-day dose because one dose is a full day of medication. If medication is taken two to three times a day, the seizure risk from missing one dose is less. But missing several doses consecutively increases the likelihood of a seizure.

What to do if you forget a dose

This should be discussed with your neurologist when first starting a medication. Everyone's situation is different and there may be varying instructions for different medications

- In general, if someone takes medication morning and night and the morning dose is forgotten – if its lunchtime or earlier take the forgotten dose as soon as possible. If it's after lunchtime and getting too close to the evening dose it's better to omit the morning dose and just take the evening dose.
- For once-daily medication, the forgotten dose should be taken as soon as you remember it.
- It is also important that if a dose is missed, not to take twice as much the next time because a larger than normal dose could cause side-effects.

For more information about what to do if you miss a dose see Dr Dan McLaughlin discuss it [here](#)



If you are unsure of what to do if a dose is missed or a double dose is taken, contact your prescribing doctor, pharmacist, Medicines Line 1300 888 763 or Poisons Information 13 11 26

Taking other medications

Medications are known to interact (mix) with each other, including ASM's and medications for other health conditions, over-the-counter drugs, illicit drugs and complementary therapies.

Always ask your prescribing doctor or pharmacist about any possible interactions with medications, complementary therapies or supplements.

You can also call the **Medicines Line on 1300 888 763** who can also advise you about medication interactions.



Managing your epilepsy

It is vital that epilepsy be managed under the guidance of your doctor. As general guidelines:

- Read the manufacturer's instructions (this should come in the box)
- Take your medication as prescribed. Changing dose or regime may provoke seizures and possibly a seizure emergency
- Check what medications or preparations may interact with your medication
- Know what to do if you miss taking your medication
- Avoid changing medication brands
- Ensure that you have a continuous supply of medication especially when travelling
- Store all tablets in original containers, clearly labelled and in a cool dry place out of reach of children
- Discuss with your doctor what effect alcohol may have on your medication and seizures or how your medication may affect contraception
- To avoid missing doses, take your medication at a regular time.
- It can also be helpful to have a list of your medications with the name, dose and times you take them. This can be important if you ever go to hospital so there are no delays or errors in getting your medication whilst in hospital.

What you can do to help control seizures

Just taking medication is not always enough to control seizures. It is important for to be aware of other things that may help with seizure control. These include:

- avoiding known seizure triggers such as sleep deprivation and stress
- keeping healthy by eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly
- having regular check-ups with the doctor and consulting your doctor if unwell or having unwanted symptoms
- keeping a seizure diary

Further information:

[Switching Brands Factsheet](#)

[Things you probably didn't know about medications](#)

[Managing your seizures](#)

[Self Management Factsheet](#)

Reference:

Australian Government Department of Health. (2020) NPS Medicinewise: Managing Your Medicines. Accessed July 2020 <https://www.nps.org.au/consumers/managing-your-medicines>