

# EPILEPSY IN OLDER ADULTS

## FACT SHEET



# EPILEPSY IN OLDER ADULTS

**Epilepsy is more likely to develop in later life than at any other age. It is the third most common neurological disorder in older people over 65 years after stroke and dementia**

In this age group, common causes of epilepsy include:

- Stroke. The leading cause of epilepsy in this age group. In some cases, a seizure may be the first sign of a stroke.
- Degenerative brain conditions such as Alzheimer's Disease or other forms of dementia. People with Alzheimer's Disease have a higher risk of developing epilepsy than those with other dementias.
- Head injury or trauma
- Brain tumours
- Alcohol or substance misuse

As with other age groups, up to one-third to one-half of older adults develop epilepsy without a clearly identified cause.

## Diagnosis



Diagnosing epilepsy at this age can sometimes be challenging. This may be because:

- Focal seizures are often seen upon presentation.

Focal seizures are common in this age group and have more subtle symptoms such as confusion, unusual or repetitive behaviour, hearing or seeing things and sporadic memory loss. These signs are easy to mistake for dementia, depression or anxiety.

- Seizures may be confused for other health conditions and other medical episodes may be confused with seizures.

Seizures can be confused for other conditions, such as fainting, vertigo, migraine, heart problems, diabetes, or medication side effects. Likewise, confusion and changes in awareness could also be due to other causes, such as dementia, infections, dehydration, psychiatric illness, or certain medications.

- Seizures may be unwitnessed if the person is living alone, making it harder to understand what is happening.
- Older adults may also see several different health professionals, and lack of communication between them could lead to vital health information being missed. It is important to use someone such as a GP, to be the main coordinator of medical information. This helps ensure nothing important is missed and can make diagnosis easier.
- Confusion, tiredness, or headache after a seizure are common. In older adults, recovery may take longer, even hours rather than minutes, which can make diagnosis more difficult.

**If confusion is prolonged, seek urgent medical advice**

# SEIZURE MANAGEMENT

## When you are diagnosed with epilepsy, medication is the first treatment.



Seizures generally are more likely to be controlled with antiseizure medication at this age. However, older people may be more sensitive to medication side effects.

Some unwanted effects of antiseizure medication include tiredness, unsteadiness, tremor, visual disturbances, changes in mood or behaviour, and stomach upsets.

Starting medication on a low dose and slowly increasing it until seizures stop is generally the approach, with the aim of keeping the dose as low as possible to maintain seizure control.

Ask your doctor or pharmacist for the Consumer Medication Information leaflet.

### What you may experience

Antiseizure medication can sometimes interact with other medications. Your doctor will choose the best treatment for your type of epilepsy and take your other medications into account. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist about possible interactions — even with over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, or supplements.

As we get older, our bodies can become more sensitive to medication side effects such as dizziness, poor balance, or unsteadiness. This can increase the risk of falls or injury during a seizure. Taking simple safety steps around the home can help reduce this risk.

After a seizure, you might feel tired, sore, or confused. For some, recovery can take several days or even longer. This can be especially challenging if you live alone, so it's a good idea to have a plan or support in place for those times.

Memory difficulties are common in people with epilepsy and can make it harder to remember medications. Simple tools like a pillbox, phone reminders, or taking medication with meals can help. Your pharmacist can also organise your medication into a pre-packed system for a fee.

Other health conditions can sometimes affect how your epilepsy is managed, so keeping all your healthcare providers informed is important. Your GP can help with this.

- **If you are having medication side effects, do not stop taking antiseizure medications without speaking to your doctor.**
- **Changing medication without medical advice can cause seizures which could more severe.**
- **Always speak to your doctor about any medication issues.**



## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT



A new diagnosis of epilepsy can be life changing and affect your independence and quality of life. It can be confusing, difficult to accept and adjust to being diagnosed with epilepsy.

- Contact us on 1300 37 45 37 to speak to an epilepsy nurse

Some people become anxious about having a seizure or getting seizure related injuries. This can affect your physical and emotional well-being and should be addressed before it becomes a significant problem.

- Speak to your doctor if you are frequently worrying about having a seizure.

Living alone may make the unpredictable nature of epilepsy more problematic. Many older people live alone, and safety can be a concern, especially if seizures are not well controlled.

- [My Aged Care](#) may be able to provide support. Call 1800 200 422

Epilepsy can contribute to social isolation and withdrawal which can lead to anxiety and depression. It is important to stay connected with family, friends and community groups.

- Talk to your doctor if you feel your mood and motivation is affected. Depression can happen at any age. Your GP can organise a mental health plan through Medicare for rebates for psychology sessions

Losing your driver's licence can further increase the likelihood of social isolation and create a dependency on others.

- This may not be forever. If your seizures are controlled by medication, and you meet the driving criteria, your license will be reinstated. However, this may be a time to think about living close to other transport options.

Seizures and medication can contribute to forgetfulness, poor concentration, memory lapses and mental confusion.

- Regularly reviews with your doctor can address these problems.

Many older people gain seizure control with medication, and epilepsy doesn't stop them from living independently and leading a fulfilling life.

Contact us on:

Phone: 1300 37 45 37

Email: [epilepsy@epilepsy.org.au](mailto:epilepsy@epilepsy.org.au)

[Book a telehealth appointment with an epilepsy nurse](#)

Visit our website



Disclaimer: This information is given to provide accurate, general information about epilepsy. Medical information and knowledge changes rapidly and you should consult your doctor for more detailed information. This is not medical advice, and you should not make any medication or treatment changes without consulting your doctor.