Epilepsy Action Australia

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SEIZURES DURING SLEEP

FACT SHEET

P 1300 37 45 37 | E EPILEPSY@EPILEPSY.ORG.AU | EPILEPSY.ORG.AU

SEIZURES DURING SLEEP

Seizures during sleep are common and can occur with any type of epilepsy.

Some people have seizures occurring only during sleep whilst others may have seizures when both awake or asleep. Epileptic seizures that occur exclusively or primarily while a person is sleeping, falling asleep, or waking up, are called *nocturnal seizures.*

Sleep and seizures – some facts

Sleep deprivation is a common seizure trigger. Many people with epilepsy report lack of sleep increases their seizures.

Night-time (nocturnal) seizures disrupt sleep. Even brief seizures can cause broken sleep and lead to daytime drowsiness.

Daytime drowsiness increases seizure risk. For people who usually only have seizures during sleep, being overtired may trigger them while awake.

Sleep problems affect quality of life. People with epilepsy who have sleep disturbances report a poorer quality of life, compared to those without sleep disturbances.

Medication can impact sleep. Some antiseizure medications (ASMs) can contribute to sleep difficulties or daytime drowsiness

Seizures and sleep disorders overlap. Nocturnal seizures may be misdiagnosed as a sleep disorder and vice versa

Sleep apnoea is more common. It is about twice as common in people with poorly controlled epilepsy than in the general population

Treating sleep disorders helps. Managing sleep apnoea or other sleep conditions often improves both seizure control and overall quality of life.

Epilepsy and sleep interact. Sleep disorders can worsen epilepsy, and epilepsy can exacerbate some sleep disorders

Diagnosing nocturnal seizures

It can be difficult to diagnose nocturnal seizures because they happen during sleep and the person may not be aware they are happening.

An eyewitness account or detailed seizure history is often crucial for diagnosis. Doctors may recommend a sleep EEG.

If left undiagnosed, seizures can cause excessive daytime sleepiness, poor concentration, learning difficulties, and mood or behaviour changes, reducing quality of life.

Seizures that occur during sleep may also happen during an afternoon nap - they are not limited to night-time.

WHY DO NOCTURNAL SEIZURES OCCUR?

Epileptic seizures are often influenced by the sleep-wake cycle. It is thought the change of state during sleep impacts the brain activity linked with seizures (in people with epilepsy) because some seizures occur predominantly in certain stages of sleep, or upon awakening.

In wakefulness, our brain waves remain fairly constant, but during sleep there are many changes.

Nocturnal seizures can be triggered by changes in the brains electrical activity moving between different stages of sleep and awakening, and there are some dramatic changes on EEG during these sleep changes.

Can they change to daytime seizures?

If a person maintains a pattern of only having seizures during sleep for several years, the probability of the seizures happening when they are awake, is small.

This does not mean daytime seizures won't occur. There may be extenuating situations such as extreme stressors or sleep deprivation and medication changes or withdrawal, all which lower their seizure threshold and increase the risk of a seizure, day or night.

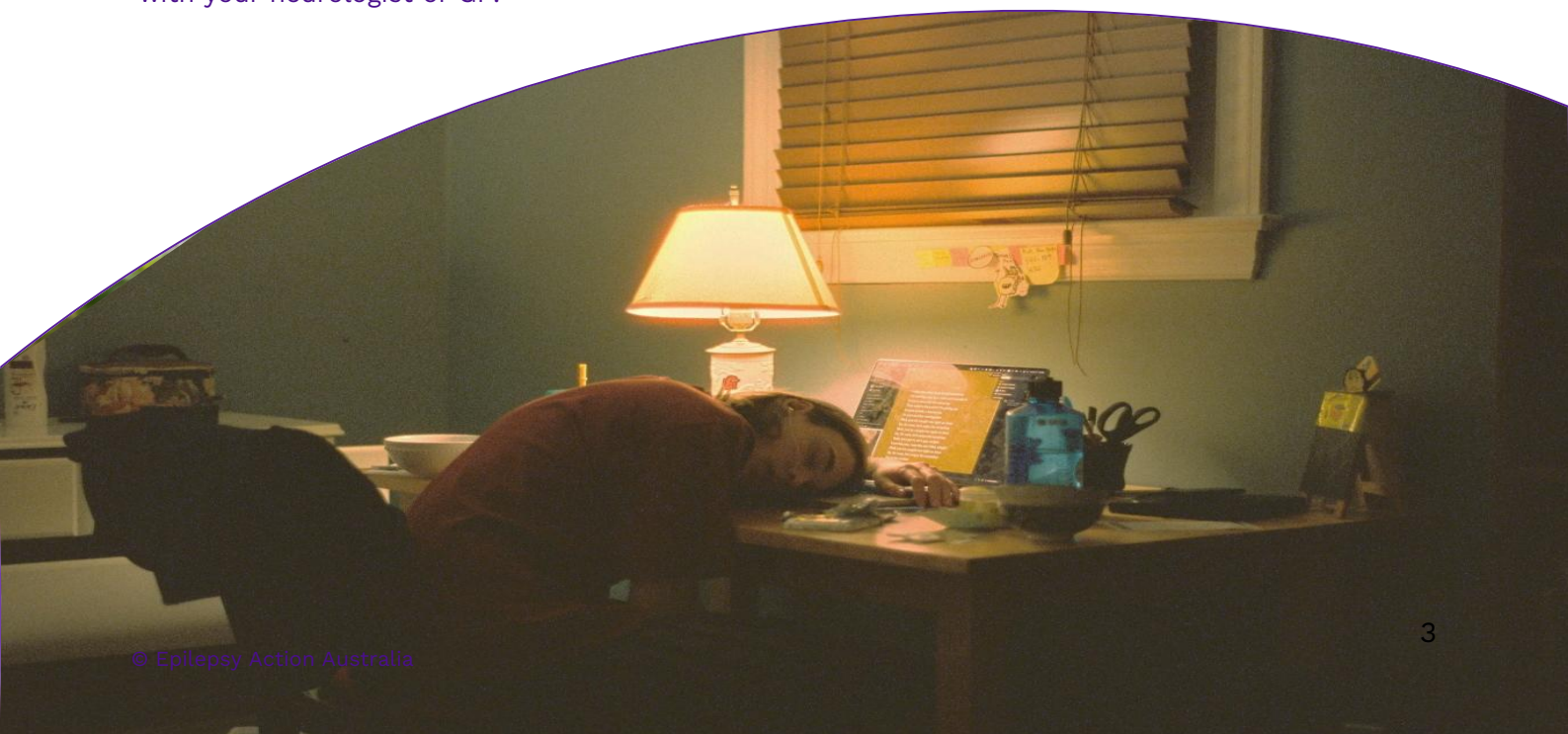
Daytime seizures may also occur if someone with nocturnal seizures decides to take a daytime nap or becomes very drowsy during the day. With good seizure and lifestyle management however, the risks of a daytime seizure can be greatly reduced.

How are they managed?

Treatment is generally based on the type of seizures rather than on the time of them happening. Although sometimes the specialist may prescribe a higher evening dose of antiseizure medication.

It is important to aim for the best seizure control possible because nocturnal seizures interrupt sleep patterns. This can cause a cycle of sleep deprivation, which is a common seizure trigger, and may increase the risk of more seizures occurring. Nocturnal seizures are also associated with risk.

The effect of antiseizure medication on sleep varies from person to person. If you feel your medication has a negative impact on your sleep, or you are excessively tired it is worth discussing with your neurologist or GP.



RISKS

Safety

Having a seizure in bed, particularly if you live or sleep alone, poses a number of safety risks. For a person with nocturnal seizures, it may be wise to:

- Choose a low bed and avoid sleeping in a top bunk
- Keep heavy or sharp cornered furniture away from the bedside to prevent injury
- Consider using a safety mat on the floor next to the bed if likely to fall out of bed during seizures.
- Wall mounted lamps pose less safety risks than ordinary table lamps or study lamps, which can be easily knocked over.
- There are many devices for night-time seizure monitoring available for use in the home. They can alert others to a seizure. See some safety devices available.
- There are also special pillows available called an 'anti-suffocation' pillow, which are more porous
- If there is someone available to help if you have a seizure, make sure they know how to what to do. Download a seizure first aid poster here

SUDEP

Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy (SUDEP) is when a person with epilepsy dies suddenly and prematurely and no reason for death is found.

SUDEP deaths are often unwitnessed with many occurring overnight during sleep. There may be obvious signs a seizure has happened, though this isn't always the case.

Although the risk of SUDEP is very low, the risk increases for people with tonic-clonic seizures, especially if they happen at night or when asleep. Click here to see how to take action against this risk

We also have a SUDEP and Safety Checklist which your GP or an Epilepsy Nurse can discuss with you.

Managing sleep and seizures

- Prioritise sleep hygiene: Have a regular sleep schedule and routine and create a sleep-conducive environment in your bedroom.
- Address sleep disorders: If you feel seizures aren't the problem ask about getting some sleep testing done to see if you have an underlying sleep disorder.
- Manage stress: Stress can lead to sleep problems, so stress management is also important.
- Consult a doctor: Raise the topic of sleep problems and seizure triggers with your neurologist or GP.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle: Regular exercise and a healthy diet also supports better sleep.

If nocturnal seizures aren't detected or diagnosed, this can cause excessive daytime fatigue, memory & concentration problems, plus increased risks.

Good sleep patterns are essential for people with epilepsy.

Contact us on:

Phone: 1300 37 45 37

Email: epilepsy@epilepsy.org.au

Book a telehealth appointment with an epilepsy nurse