

EPILEPSY AND SWIMMING

FACT SHEET



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Swimming can be a fun and healthy activity, but for people with epilepsy, it's important to take extra precautions.

Whether you're an experienced swimmer or just starting out, having a seizure in water — even shallow water — can be life-threatening. Drowning can happen quickly and quietly, often without warning, so prevention is the key. Just like other safety advice, water precautions should be tailored to each person's needs.

However, one universal rule applies: never swim alone. This is good advice for everyone, but especially important for people with epilepsy.

If seizures are not well controlled, it's vital to have a safety plan in place for any activity near water — including swimming, bathing, or even relaxing by a pool or beach. Plans will vary depending on the individual and their seizure type but below are some helpful guidelines to consider.



Good practice tips

- Never swim alone. Always have a responsible person and confident swimmer nearby who knows what to do if a seizure occurs. *Note: If your seizures are severe, having two companions may be safer.*
- Choose safe swimming spots. Opt for supervised pools or areas with lifeguards rather than open water.
- Stay within your depth. Staying in water where you can stand may reduce risk.
- Use an outside lane if swimming laps. It makes it easier for others to reach you quickly if needed.
- Tell others about your epilepsy. Make sure your swim buddy or lifeguard knows about your condition and how to help.
- Wear a life jacket or flotation device if seizures are frequent. This can help keep your head above water during a seizure. Wear a bright swim cap to help others spot you quickly in the water.
- Don't rest at the water's edge. If a seizure happens while sitting or lying near the edge, you could fall in unexpectedly.
- Avoid swimming when tired, unwell, or during times you're more likely to have a seizure. Be especially cautious during changes to your medication, as this can increase seizure risk.
- If you have photosensitive epilepsy, wear tinted goggles or sunglasses. These can help reduce glare, flickering, or reflections that may trigger seizures.
- Skip breath-holding or rapid deep breathing. These techniques, often used for underwater swimming, can trigger seizures in some people.
- Consider swimming lessons. They can help build confidence and teach safety strategies.
- Have a clear emergency plan. Know what steps to take if a seizure happens in or near water — and make sure your swim buddy does too.
- Talk to your doctor about whether swimming is safe for you.



WHAT TO DO

If a seizure occurs in water

- Support the person's head so their face is out of the water.
- Tilt their head back to ensure a clear airway.
- If in a pool, remove the person from the water when the jerking stops. In the rare circumstance where the jerking does not stop, seek assistance from others if possible, and remove the person from the water at the shallowest end of the pool.
- If in the surf remove the person from the water immediately.
- Flotation devices may be useful when removing someone from the water.
- Seek assistance if you can.

Once out of the water

- Call an ambulance, even if the person is breathing as they may have inhaled water.
- Place the person on their side.
- Check to see if they are breathing.
- If there is no sign of life, [begin resuscitation](#). The 000 staff will guide you through this process.

Tell the ambulance crew

- How long the seizure lasted
- What happened during the seizure
- Was the person unresponsive or unconscious?
- Did the person have any breathing difficulties?
- Do you think they inhaled water?
- Any injuries

Contact us on:

Phone: 1300 37 45 37

Email: epilepsy@epilepsy.org.au

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

See:

[Guidelines for Resuscitation in Drowning](#)

[Theraquatics](#) for water safety devices

[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.