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Coronavirus (COVID-19) and epilepsy

Last reviewed 18 March 2020

We have been asked how coronavirus may affect people with epilepsy. Here we answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

Will people with epilepsy be more severely affected by coronavirus?

There is currently no information to say that people with epilepsy are more severely affected by coronavirus than people without health conditions. Public Health England has issued guidance on which conditions can increase your risk of severe illness from coronavirus. **Epilepsy is not on this list.**

For most people, coronavirus causes mild symptoms, and they recover quickly after a few days. We are in daily contact with the Department of Health and Social Care in the UK. We will update this page as soon as we have any more information for people with epilepsy.

The guidance about who is vulnerable mentions chronic neurological conditions. Does that mean epilepsy?

Although epilepsy is a chronic neurological condition, the guidance on who is most at risk is based on who is eligible for the flu jab on medical grounds. Most people with epilepsy, who have no other medical conditions, are not eligible for the flu jab.

If you do not usually get the flu jab on medical grounds, then you are unlikely to be at increased risk of severe symptoms from coronavirus. It is still important to follow official advice on avoiding catching and spreading coronavirus.

If I catch coronavirus could it trigger a seizure?

We have no information about coronavirus triggering seizures in people with epilepsy. However, some people with epilepsy say they are more likely to have a seizure when they are unwell, particularly if they have an illness with a temperature. The NHS advises drinking plenty of water and taking paracetamol to help with the symptoms of coronavirus including fever. Paracetamol is safe for most people with epilepsy, but check with your pharmacist that it doesn't interact with your epilepsy medicine.

The best thing you can do to protect yourself from having a seizure is to keep taking your epilepsy medicine as usual throughout any illness.

For most people with epilepsy, a seizure is not a medical emergency and does not need hospital treatment. However, if you are at risk of status epilepticus, make sure you have an up-to-date emergency care plan from your epilepsy specialist. This should tell you and the people around you what to do if you have a seizure and when to call an ambulance.

The NHS website has advice about what to do if you think you might have coronavirus. This is being updated frequently.

Will the situation with coronavirus lead to shortages of my epilepsy medicine?

The Department of Health and Social Care is working with drug companies to minimise any impact of coronavirus on drug supplies. Drug companies have already built up stockpiles of medicines in preparation for Brexit and have now been asked to maintain this level of stockpiling. This should mean medicines will continue to be available, even if there are temporary disruptions to the supply chain. If we find out about any shortages of epilepsy medicines, we will post these on our Drugwatch webpage .

What do I need to know about self-isolation?

The UK government is currently advising people to self-isolate for 7 days if they show signs of coronavirus. If you live with other people, they should stay at home for 14 days. They have issued advice for everyone about how to do this.

In addition to this advice, if you have epilepsy it's a good idea to think about:

How to get your medicine

It's important to plan in advance how you would get your medicines in case you need to self-isolate. This could be getting a friend or family member to collect your prescriptions for you. Or you could make arrangements for your pharmacy to deliver your medicines to your home. You may wish to check with them now that they offer this service, and how to sign up to it. If you usually collect your prescriptions from your doctor's surgery, you could ask if they can be sent electronically to a pharmacy of your choice instead.

Keeping in touch

If you live alone, have a plan to keep in regular contact with friends, family members or neighbours while self-isolating. You could ask them to contact you regularly by phone or text to check you are ok. This is especially important if you have uncontrolled seizures.

Sleeping arrangements

Government advice about self-isolating recommends sleeping in a separate bedroom if possible. However, there is some evidence that sharing a bedroom reduces your risk of sudden unexpected death in epilepsy (SUDEP). For most people with epilepsy the risk of SUDEP is very low. But if you have sleep seizures you may need to think carefully about whether sleeping in a separate bedroom is safe for you.

How can I protect myself from coronavirus?

Follow NHS advice to avoid catching or spreading coronavirus. This includes:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water
- Wash your hands when you get home or into work
- Use hand sanitiser if soap and water are not available
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough or sneeze
- Put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands afterwards
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are unclean

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Epilepsy Action is a charity that improves the lives of everyone affected by epilepsy. We give advice, improve healthcare, fund research and campaign for change.

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