



Mental Health Issues and Epilepsy



Your Mental Health

Research shows that your seizures put you at increased risk for depression and anxiety. This can be caused by changes in your brain from the seizures or shared pathways in the brain affecting both seizures and mood. The stress of having seizures can also make you more vulnerable to feeling down or anxious.

In addition, people living with epilepsy are at increased risk for Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Bipolar Disorder, psychosis (hallucinations or delusions) and suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Quality of Life

Having seizures can impact many areas of your life. You may need to:

- Restrict activities because of the disease or because you worry what people will think if you have a seizure
- Stop driving
- Make changes at work or stop working
- Change your parenting style or decide against having children
- Reexamine relationships if people treat you differently because of your seizures
- Learn new ways to manage your daily life
- Need to adjust to having times when things go well and times when something unexpected happens like a seizure or a medication change that causes a problem

Cognitive Changes

Many people with seizures experience changes in their ability to think. This can include problems with:

- **Attention and concentration** – reading or paying attention to a television show or conversation
- **Memory** – learning new things and remembering things like appointments, names, where you put things and conversations
- **Language** – forgetting words or having trouble finding the right word
- **Processing speed** – taking longer to process information and perform tasks
- **Executive functioning** – this includes organizing and planning (setting your schedule or tracking finances) and being able to stop yourself from saying inappropriate things

These changes may be due to the impact of seizures on your brain, effects of seizure medications, or both. Such problems can also get worse with stress, poor sleep and depression/anxiety.

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There are ways to cope with these changes including making lists, keeping things in the same place, increasing routine in your life and repeating key information aloud. Saying and hearing what you are thinking helps process information and strengthens connections in your brain.

Stress

Stress – whether it’s related to your epilepsy or everyday stress – can trigger seizures. We also know that people under a lot of stress may not sleep or eat well, remember to take medications or exercise. To improve your sleep, practice going to bed at the same time each night, avoid caffeine in the afternoon/evening and use the bedroom for sleep only. Alcohol, too, can make people more vulnerable to seizures.

Seizure Medications and Mood

The primary goal of treatment is to stop your seizures, but we have to consider if the medication affects how you feel and go about your daily life. Some seizure medications can cause mood changes – depression, anxiety and irritability – and some can affect cognitive abilities like concentration. Others can help improve your mood.

The areas of your brain affecting mood are often involved in seizures, so medications to stop seizures can affect your emotions. However, medications work differently in different people. Sometimes medication side effects such as mood changes may be the worst when you start taking it or increase the dose. If you experience mood or cognitive problems you believe are related to a medication, talk to your doctor. A dose change may help or your doctor may expect the effects to decrease as your body adjusts to the medicine. If not, you may need a different medication.

Treatment

There are many treatments for mood disorders, cognitive problems and stress. Medication may help with severe depression and anxiety, although we don’t recommend long-term use of benzodiazepines for anxiety as they can be unsafe and may stop working over time. Medication can also help with sleep in the short term, we find behavioral treatment of sleep problems safer and more effective in the long term.

Counseling can help you gain insight into your feelings, what may be causing them and how to make positive changes to feel better. Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps you better understand how you think about things, learn healthier ways of thinking about problems and change your response to difficult situations. Family therapy can help your loved ones adjust to living with epilepsy and address issues that may contribute to your anxiety.

Cognitive rehabilitation therapy can also help if you have memory and other thinking problems by strengthening your cognitive skills and teaching you new ways to function.

Talk to your doctor about any problems you experience and ask about treatments that may be right for you.

For more information, call 860.972.3621 or go to HartfordHealthCare.org/Epilepsy



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