



Seizures and Sleep

About Sleep

Have you ever found yourself saying, “I’m tired all the time but I just don’t seem to be able to get a good night’s sleep?” Most of us know what it’s like to toss and turn and struggle to get the sleep we know we need. Lack of sleep can leave us tired and irritable the following day.

But if we have seizures, lack of sleep or troubled sleep, may affect us even more. It may make us more likely to have seizures.

Doctors are discovering that sleep and seizures are linked in many ways, some of them surprising. They’re even finding that some stages of sleep are more likely than others to trigger seizures.

About Seizures

A seizure is a sudden change in awareness, actions, or feelings that you can’t control. Having a seizure is a sign that something has affected the electrical system that makes your brain work. For a minute or two, it has changed the way your brain controls the rest of your body.

During a seizure, a person may fall and shake, or black out, or have uncontrollable shaking, or sudden muscle jerks. When seizures happen from time to time, doctors say that the person has epilepsy. Some people call epilepsy a seizure disorder.

Epilepsy is treated with medicines. If they are taken every day, most of them do a good job of preventing seizures. Another way of preventing seizures is to find out whether there are things that make seizures more likely to happen.

Lack of sleep or disturbed sleep is one of those things. For some of us, better sleep can mean a better life – and fewer seizures

Sleep and Seizures

Sleep can affect seizures and seizures can affect sleep in many ways. Some people have seizures only while they are asleep. Some people are most likely to have seizures just after they wake up in the morning. And some people have seizures while they are asleep without realizing it. All they know is that sometimes they wake up with aching muscles and a bitten tongue.

How Sleep Works

When we go to sleep, how our brains work changes in special ways. These changes, in some people, make it more likely that they will have a seizure.



Doctors have found there are different kinds of sleep. In one kind of sleep, our eyes dart back and forth under closed eyelids. It's called REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. People with epilepsy are less likely to have seizures during this stage of sleep.

Another type of sleep is much deeper. If people have seizures when they are asleep, they are more likely to happen during deep sleep.

Sleep Disturbances

If people with epilepsy go for many hours without sleep, they are more likely to have a seizure. So it's helpful to know what kinds of things can get in the way of a good night's sleep.

Some people snore loudly. Some people stop breathing for a few seconds. They may do it several times during the night. It is called sleep apnea. Studies have shown that lots of people with epilepsy also have sleep apnea. In some cases it may be caused by the medicines they take to prevent seizures. Both heavy snoring and breaks in breathing interfere with calm, restful sleep. And that can lead to seizures.

If you or a loved one are having seizures at night, check with your doctor.

If you know you snore loudly or have pauses in breathing that are interfering with sleep and leaving you tired in the morning, tell your doctor. He or she may suggest ways to treat those conditions. Treating heavy snoring or pauses in breathing may improve your sleep. And better sleep may make it less likely that you will have a seizure.

Treatment Changes

People with epilepsy already take medicines to prevent seizures. If they are also having seizures at night, their doctors may suggest changes in how and when the meds are taken. For example, the doctor might increase how much medicine a person takes right before bedtime. A higher dose during the day might make someone too sleepy to get on with everyday life. But a higher dose at night might be just what's needed to produce restful sleep.

Things to Avoid

Seizures, snoring and pauses in breathing are not the only thing that disturbs sleep.

Going to bed late, drinking caffeine drinks, or having a heavy meal late in the evening, can make it harder to sleep well at night.

Using alcohol may help you fall asleep but it is likely to wake you up a few hours later.

Looking Ahead

If you have nighttime seizures, or if you don't sleep well and feel tired and worn out all day, there may be better nights ahead. Doctors are recognizing that some sleep problems are caused by seizures. And that sleep itself may, in one way or another, lead to seizures.

Good Night Tips

- A warm bath before bed may help you sleep.
- Read for a while before you turn out the light.
- Use earplugs to get to sleep if you live in a noisy environment.
- Try some relaxation exercises at bedtime, or play relaxing music at a low level.
- Invest in a comfortable mattress.

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You can join the BC Epilepsy Society as a member and receive all the program and service benefits.

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