



# Epilepsy and Women

[www.epilepsy.org.za](http://www.epilepsy.org.za)

Our bodies experience many physical changes throughout our lifetime and there is no evidence suggesting that epilepsy interferes with this process. However, epilepsy has specific implications for women in respect of their gynaecological and reproductive health.

## Female biological changes

### Menstruation

There is no evidence to suggest that women with epilepsy experience any major differences in their menstrual patterns.

Some women may find a change in seizure pattern with an increase in seizures either during their period or at the time of ovulation.

### Menopause

Menopause usually occurs between your mid-40s to mid-50s and may have unpleasant symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) may be prescribed to relieve these symptoms.

There is no medical proof to indicate an association between epilepsy and menopausal changes or that HRT influences seizure control or the absorption of anti-epileptic drugs. However, you may very well experience problems if you have both osteoporosis and seizures.

## You and your partner

### Relationships

It is understandable that women with epilepsy may be anxious about establishing intimate relationships, but many women form satisfying and stable relationships.

A successful relationship is built on honesty and trust. This means that both of you need to be open with each other

and discuss your epilepsy and its implications for your life together.

### Sex drive

Anti-epileptic medication may slightly lower your sex drive. However, this is only likely in a small number of persons with epilepsy.

For most people this is not a problem and they are able to enjoy healthy sexual relations.

### Fertility

Research has shown that a limited number of women may have a lower fertility rate due to epilepsy. However, there is no reason to believe that anti-epileptic medication will reduce your fertility.

### Contraception

Women with epilepsy can choose from all the contraceptive methods available. Your doctor will be able to advise which is the most suitable for you.

It is important to note that the effectiveness of some forms of oral contraception may be reduced by anti-epileptic medication and higher doses or alternative methods may be necessary to provide adequate contraception.

### Heredity

The likelihood of passing epilepsy on to your children will depend on a variety of factors, particularly the specifics of your diagnosis.

If you have had epilepsy since birth your child has a 6% likelihood to also have epilepsy.

## Pregnancy and birth

### Family planning

If you are thinking about having a baby it is best to discuss this with your doctor as early as possible, but definitely before becoming pregnant. This will allow you to gather sufficient information to make informed choices about family planning. Your partner should join you in counselling and be encouraged to share concerns. This will ensure that both of you are informed about possible risks to you and your baby.

### Anti-epileptic medication and pregnancy

Discuss your medication with your doctor before becoming pregnant as changes may be required to minimise the risks to your baby. As some drugs can affect the growing fetus it is essential to check this with your doctor as soon as possible. For example, research has shown the risks of sodium valproate exposure in the womb resulting in physical and development disabilities.

Up to 40% of children in a British study were found to have developmental problems (delayed walking, speech, memory and language skills) while others were diagnosed with autism.

Despite these risks, it is generally preferable to remain on medication and your doctor will advise you how to balance potential risks to your baby and your own health. Sudden withdrawal of anti-epileptic medication is risky as you are likely to lose control of your seizures.

### Seizure patterns

Some women experience changes in their seizure patterns during pregnancy. There may be a slight increase or decrease in frequency.

### Diet

Some anti-epileptic medication may reduce vitamin K in the blood which can affect the clotting mechanism. In such cases your doctor may recommend that you take vitamin K orally before delivery and by your baby for a short period after birth.

While all pregnant women are advised to take a folic acid supplement during pregnancy it is particularly important for women with epilepsy.

### Medical check-ups

It is essential to see your doctor regularly during your pregnancy. You should report any seizures or incidents which occurred such as falls, vomiting, illness or injury.

## Delivery and caring for your baby

### Labour

Your labour and the delivery of your baby are not likely to be different from that of other mothers. By taking your medication correctly and getting as much rest as possible, you will reduce the risk of a seizure during labour. Remember that you should not be alone during this time and immediately after the birth.

### Breastfeeding

The likelihood of your baby being affected by anti-epileptic medication in your breast milk will depend on the specific medication you take. In most cases very little of the drug is passed on to the baby and should thus not pose a problem. In fact, this may be a way of weaning your baby off the medication absorbed during pregnancy. If you tend to have seizures without warning it is advisable to take precautions while feeding your baby. Try sitting on the floor with your back to the wall surrounded by cushions as this will protect you and your baby in the event of a seizure.

### Bathing and changing your baby

As a raised bath stand could be risky it is best to put the baby bath on the floor. If you feel this is still too risky and there is nobody to assist you, it may be best to sponge your baby down on a waterproof sheet.

Changing your baby in the cot or on a blanket on the floor is a good idea. By kneeling to the side you will fall away from your baby should a seizure occur.

### Sleep

Having a new baby in the home is physically and emotionally draining. Make sure to get plenty of rest and accept offers of assistance from family and friends.

### Parenthood

Like all new parents you and your partner will find parenthood exciting and challenging. The pleasure you get from your baby should not be affected in any way by the fact that you have epilepsy.

