Epilepsy and learning disability

This factsheet explains about people who have epilepsy and a learning disability.

This information is relevant to England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Introduction
What is the link between learning disability and epilepsy?
How can seizures be identified in someone with a learning disability?
How is epilepsy treated in people with a learning disability?
Can anti-epileptic medication cause side effects or changes in behaviour?
Can epilepsy impair cognitive functioning?

Introduction
The frequency of epilepsy occurring in people with a learning disability is higher than in the average population and increases in proportion with the severity of their disability. About 30% of people with a learning disability also have some form of epilepsy, however, in those people with a severe learning disability at least 50% will have additional epilepsy.

What is the link between learning disability and epilepsy?
Having a learning disability does not cause someone to have epilepsy and having epilepsy does not cause a learning disability. Both a learning disability and epilepsy are symptoms of underlying brain damage or dysfunction. The underlying damage may have existed from birth or may be the result of a head injury or infection.

How can seizures be identified in someone with a learning disability?
There are many types of seizure and some of them may involve strange behaviour. Seizures in people with a learning disability may be more difficult to recognise depending on the nature of that person's learning disability. Periods of confusion or unusual or repetitive behaviour may be signs of a seizure. Some people with a learning disability show unusual behaviour, which may not be related to epilepsy. Therefore seizures may go unrecognised or be difficult to tell apart from behaviour related to their learning disability. This is particularly true for people who have poor communication skills and cannot explain their symptoms. An EEG may help to decide whether certain behaviours are seizures.

How is epilepsy treated in people with a learning disability?
People with a learning disability are given the same sorts of treatments for their seizures as people without a learning disability. However seizure control may be more difficult to achieve
due to the level of underlying damage to the brain. The seizures may also be more frequent or severe.

**Can anti-epileptic medication cause side effects or changes in behaviour?**

Some people may react to their medication. A brain that has been damaged is more prone to possible side effects. Reactions can include feeling drowsy or sick, effects on vision or changes in behaviour. Sometimes side effects include poor attention, restlessness and slowed or unsteady movement. If someone has communication difficulties, the side effects may cause a person to be withdrawn or present challenging behaviour.

**Can epilepsy impair cognitive functioning?**

Cognitive functioning is the mental process of knowing, thinking and learning. People with a learning disability have some difficulty with this process and this is usually due to their learning disability rather than their epilepsy. If a person's seizures are under control and their medication is kept simple then further cognitive difficulties are less likely. If seizures are poorly controlled or very frequent they may affect the person's overall quality of life. If seizure control improves these difficulties may also improve.

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**Key terms:**

1. **Epilepsy** - the tendency to have seizures that start in the brain
2. **EEG** - a test to measure the electrical activity of the brain

**This document was approved by Stella Pearson (National Society for Epilepsy) on 13/07/2009**

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