

Pregnancy and Epilepsy

What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a condition that causes people to have repeated seizures. Seizures are waves of abnormal electrical activity in the brain that can make you miss periods of time, have convulsions, pass out, or move or behave strangely.

If I have epilepsy, can I have a healthy pregnancy?

Yes, most people with epilepsy can have a healthy and normal pregnancy. However, there is a higher risk of certain problems like an increased number of seizures during pregnancy or some anti-seizure medications harming the unborn baby.

If you have epilepsy and want to have a baby, you will need to work closely with your doctors. They will make sure that you are doing the right things to control your epilepsy and protect your baby.

More than 1 doctor will take care of you during pregnancy. Your obstetrician will take care of your pregnancy. Your epilepsy doctor will take care of your epilepsy. They will often work closely together.

What should I do before trying to get pregnant?

It is very important to talk with your doctors before you try to get pregnant. That way, they have enough time to check your anti-seizure medicine and make adjustments if needed. Certain anti-seizure medications and doses can harm an unborn baby.

You should never stop your anti-seizure medicine on your own.

In addition to checking your medicine, your doctor will prescribe a vitamin called folic acid or folate. All people who could get pregnant should take folic acid, whether or not they are actively trying to get pregnant. Folic acid helps prevent problems that babies can be born with. For people with epilepsy, taking it before and during pregnancy can lower the risk of developmental delays and autism in children.

There are other steps that everyone should take before trying to get pregnant, too. Your doctor or nurse can talk to you about general planning for pregnancy.

How will my epilepsy effect my baby?

Having seizures while you are pregnant might harm your baby. If you fall down, you could hurt yourself and your baby. When you have a convulsive seizure (the kind that causes shaking and might make you pass out), your baby might not get enough oxygen.

How might my baby affect my epilepsy?

Most women find that pregnancy does not affect their seizures. However, some women will have more frequent seizures during their first or third trimester. During pregnancy, the blood level of seizure medications may decrease due to hormonal changes and increasing body size. This can increase the likelihood of seizures. The blood level of seizure medications may need to be checked periodically, which you should discuss with your doctor.

How can I lower my chances of having a seizure?

- Take your anti-seizure medicine exactly as directed. Do not stop or change your medicine without talking to your doctor. You might worry that your anti-seizure medicine will harm your baby. Ask your doctor about this. There is some chance that certain types of medicine could do harm, but having a seizure can also harm your baby.
- Let your doctors know if you vomit soon after taking your anti-seizure medicines, especially in early pregnancy. They might have you take another dose. If you are vomiting often, they might also give you another medicine to help prevent this.
- Let your doctor know if you start any new prescription or non-prescription medicines, or herbal drugs.
- Get enough sleep – Not getting enough sleep raises your chances of having a seizure. If possible, have your partner and family members help take care of your baby at night so you can get regular sleep.

Can I have a vaginal delivery?

Most people with epilepsy have a normal vaginal delivery. Having epilepsy is not a reason on its own to have a C-section (surgery to get the baby out). It is uncommon to have a seizure during delivery. Even so, your doctor will watch you closely during your delivery and adjust your medicine, if needed.

Will my baby be healthy?

If you were healthy and your epilepsy was under control during your pregnancy, chances are very good that your baby will be healthy.

Will I be able to breastfeed?

Yes. Most people are able to breastfeed even when taking anti-seizure medicine. But it's also important to try to get enough sleep, since not sleeping enough raises your chances of having a seizure. If you are breastfeeding, you should make a plan to regularly have another adult help if possible. They can care for your baby during the night and feed them with a bottle while you sleep. This way, you can sleep for a longer stretch of time, ideally getting your regular sleep each night. Also, try to take extra naps each day whenever possible.

You can use a breast pump so your baby can get breast milk from a bottle, or you can use formula for the bottle feedings. If you want to breastfeed or pump, talk with your doctor.

What else can I do to protect my baby?

If you have frequent seizures, there are things you can do to help keep your baby safe after they are born. You can:

Change your baby's diaper on the floor – That way, if you have a seizure, your baby won't fall off of a changing table.

Have someone else with you when you bathe your baby – Then your baby won't be alone in the bathtub if you have a seizure.

Tell your baby's doctor that you have epilepsy so they understand your situation.