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alcohol/substance abuse and epilepsy

Alcohol

Taken in moderation drinking beer and spirits can be pleasurable and relatively harmless. It is the abuse of alcohol which causes the trouble.

Virtually all young people are introduced to alcohol before reaching the age where they can legally buy it themselves. It is essential, therefore, that young and inexperienced people who have epilepsy are aware of the particular dangers of excessive use of alcohol in relation to their medical condition.

Since epilepsy results from a malfunction of the brain it is fairly obvious that the introduction of a substance that, in any event, affects normal brain function can be a recipe for an increase in seizures. It has to be remembered also that alcohol is not the only foreign substance reaching the brain, there is also the anti-epileptic drug which is specifically designed to influence the workings of the brain. Requiring the anti-epileptic drug to compete with excess alcohol in the brain is, as a general rule, a recipe for disaster.

In reality, social drinking in moderation will not affect those with epilepsy any more than others who have never had a seizure in their lives. A glass of wine with a meal or a quiet drink with family and friends should do no harm at all.

It is not only important for people with epilepsy to be aware of particular problems of alcohol in relation to their condition but their friends must have responsible attitudes as well.

Recreational/Illicit Drugs

Because they are sometimes thought of as stress relievers and an opportunity to escape from everyday reality, "street drugs" can be perceived as being helpful in controlling seizures. They are not helpful. In fact, they can be the very cause of seizures.

Indirectly, narcotic drugs (those derived from opium and those manufactured to be chemically similar to opium) can lead, because of an induced forgetfulness, to a failure to take correct doses of antiepileptic medication. Directly, when taken in large doses, narcotics can lead to the brain being deprived of oxygen, which can induce seizures.

Stimulants, such as amphetamines, taken in very high doses, can cause tonic-clonic seizures, heart attacks and even death.

Cocaine is very dangerous. Seizures induced by taking high doses of the drug have been linked to heart failure and death. The seizures, which can happen within a very short time of the drug being taken, can occur not only in those with a history of epilepsy but in people who have never before had a seizure in their lives.

There is no scientific evidence to support a view that marijuana is in any way effective in controlling seizures.