



Mersey Region Epilepsy Association

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epilepsy and employment

If you have epilepsy, thinking positively about what you CAN do is important when looking for a job and keeping in employment. It is vital to be able to identify and stress your skills and experience, and to have a clear and realistic picture about what you can offer to prospective employers.

FINDING A JOB

What sort of work?

There are a variety of jobs open to people with epilepsy - and only some which aren't.

Because everyone's epilepsy is different, the sort of job you decide to apply for depends on your epilepsy. Ask yourself some questions: What sort of seizures do I have? How often do I have them? How well controlled by medication are they? Will my medication slow me down at work?

If your seizures are well controlled, or infrequent, there will probably be a wider range of jobs open to you. Even if you are likely to have seizures regularly during working hours, it doesn't mean you can't do the job. You may, though, be more limited in the kind of work you can apply for.

There are some jobs which, under statutory law, aren't open to people with epilepsy. These include aircraft pilot, fire-fighter and joining the police force and prison services. To be considered for a professional driving job, such as taxi or ambulance driver, you would need to have been seizure-free without medication for ten years.

Other types of work depend on how your epilepsy affects you. It wouldn't be a good idea, for instance, to work at heights or with unguarded fires if you have uncontrolled seizures. You can train as a teacher if you have been seizure-free for a year, although if you want to teach practical components or PE, the type and frequency of your seizures will be taken into account. Likewise for nursing - depending on your epilepsy, many areas could be open to you but some, such as midwifery, might not be.

Can I get a job which involves driving?

Although professional driving jobs may not be open to you, you can take a job which involves driving provided you fulfil the legal requirements for a licence for an ordinary vehicle. The regulations are outlined in our leaflet on driving.

Can I work on computers?

An increasing number of jobs now involve working with computers and despite the misconception that this may trigger seizures in anyone with epilepsy, unless you have photosensitive epilepsy, it's unlikely. Even if you do have photosensitive epilepsy, there may be precautions you can take, such as using a special screen to cut down on flicker.

How do I go about getting a job?

If you are still at school, you can see a Careers Adviser to plan your training and future employment. If not, you can begin by searching through conventional channels such as responding to advertisements in newspapers, signing up with recruitment agencies, or approaching companies directly.

If you are unemployed, you may be eligible to take part in the Government's Welfare to Work programme, New Deal, which offers help and support in training and finding a job. If necessary, the government will subsidise a job for you, or find you training with an environmental project, or within the voluntary sector. For more information, ask at your local Jobcentre.

Your Jobcentre can also offer specialist advice through a Disablement Employment Officer (DEA). The DEA, who advises on employment to people with disabilities, can help you find employment and assist you with training.

If work isn't immediately available, you could widen your experience by taking on a voluntary post, or consider further training to better your chances of a job in the future.

INTERVIEW STRATEGIES

When should I tell my employers?

You may feel that stating you have epilepsy on an application form gives prospective employers the chance to discriminate before you even get an interview. Unless an application form has specifically asked for the information, you may prefer to leave out mention of your epilepsy on the form.

This will give you the opportunity to explain about your epilepsy at interview stage. A good time to do this is at the end of the interview. By this time, you will have had the opportunity to sell your skills.

An interview is about your suitability to do the job. Discuss your epilepsy only in relation to the work you will be doing. If your seizures are infrequent or well controlled, you may want to stress that your epilepsy is unlikely to affect your work.

If you are having regular seizures and they could affect your work, be honest. Your employer may be able to make adjustments to enable you to do the job.

Some people also find it useful to take along a GP's statement about the patterns and frequencies of their seizures.

Why do I need to tell employers?

You do need to tell your employers about your epilepsy. Every employer needs to take the safety of all employees into account by fulfilling the requirements of the Health & Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974.

There are certain situations where it may be difficult for an employer to meet health and safety requirements if you have epilepsy - working at heights, for instance. Even an office situation can present risks if your employer is not aware you have epilepsy. For instance, if you have a seizure and no-one knows what to do, someone could harm you by acting inappropriately, perhaps putting something into your mouth if you have a tonic clonic seizure, or trying to restrain you.

IN THE JOB

Will my employer understand?

Some employers have a good understanding of epilepsy. Others may not, and may only think in terms of what they believe you can't do. They may, for instance, think you can't work on a VDU screen or drive a car, when you may be able to do both very well.

If your employer or workmates hold onto misconceptions about epilepsy, it's up to you to be positive and to provide them with the facts and so help them gain a better understanding. You can do this by explaining about your epilepsy in a clear and accurate way and by demonstrating in your day-to-day work that epilepsy does not affect your ability to do the job.

In turn, your employer can help you by encouraging employees to adopt an understanding attitude. They could also consider flexible ways for you to work, such as job sharing or flexi-time.

PROTECTION AT WORK

What does the law say?

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 makes it against the law for an employer with more than fifteen employees to discriminate against anyone with a disability when applying for a job or in employment.

Many people with epilepsy are covered by the Act, which also requires employers to make any 'reasonable' adjustments to the working day or premises to enable people with a disability to be employed.

If your epilepsy affects your way of working, you can talk to your employer about making adjustments. Perhaps you have nocturnal epilepsy and early starts are difficult for you? A reasonable adjustment may be for your employer to alter your hours.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

Am I insured?

Your employer has to take out insurance for injury and disease by law, and their normal Employers Liability Insurance policy will cover you as long as the work you do fulfils health and safety requirements.

Can I get a pension?

As long as you are employed, and therefore employable, you should be able to get a pension, assuming the company has a scheme.

Can I join a trade union?

The Trade Union Council (TUC) and all trade unions have positive policies on the employment of people with disabilities.

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