TEENAGERS AND EPILEPSY

DOES PUBERTY HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH SEIZURES?
Certain types of epilepsy are thought to be influenced by physical changes associated with puberty, such as juvenile myoclonic epilepsy and juvenile absence epilepsy, which typically develop before or around the time of puberty. Other types of epilepsy, such as childhood absence epilepsy and benign Rolandic epilepsy, are typically outgrown around the time of puberty.

WHY AM I ASKED NOT TO DRIVE?
Each state has laws restricting teenagers and adults from driving depending on how controlled their seizures are and when their last seizure occurred. Safety is most important when getting behind the wheel. Teenagers with epilepsy must abide by their state’s laws when obtaining their driver’s license and think about their own safety as well as the safety of others. Teenagers and adults with epilepsy in the state of Virginia cannot drive until they have not had a seizure for at least 6 months.

CAN I BE LIKE OTHER NORMAL TEENAGERS?
Teenagers with epilepsy are encouraged to be educated about their epilepsy, independent, and safe. Most go to school, have relationships, and drive. Teenagers with epilepsy are encouraged to seek out resources to aid them in living with seizures. One resource is the web site www.epilepsy.com which provides opportunity for teenagers to share their experiences with other teenagers living with epilepsy. www.EFVA.org also has a chat room for teenagers with epilepsy.

WILL MY SEIZURE MEDICATIONS AFFECT MY STUDIES?
All antiepileptic drugs (AEDs) can have side effects. A common side effect of most AEDs is sedation. Cognitive difficulties have also been reported. Side effects may affect your ability to perform at school or work. You should work with your neurologist to select the most appropriate antiepileptic drug with the least potential for negative side effects.

WILL MY MEDICATIONS AFFECT MY APPEARANCE?
Most antiepileptic drugs do not affect your appearance, but some AEDs may cause weight changes. Others have been known to cause hair loss or changes in the appearance of one’s gums. You should ask your neurologist about the side effects associated with your AEDs.
ARE THERE ANY ANTIEPILEPTIC DRUGS TEENAGERS NORMALLY TAKE?
There are no antiepileptic drugs just for teenagers. There are many antiepileptic medications available and some are more appropriate for specific types of epilepsy. You should discuss antiepileptic medication options specific to your type of epilepsy with your neurologist and any concerns you may have about what you are taking.

I HATE BEING TIRED BECAUSE OF MY MEDICATIONS. CAN ANYTHING HELP?
If you are experiencing tiredness on your medications, you should talk to your neurologist. Adjustments in dosing or timing of your medications may help. It is also important for you to get an adequate amount of sleep each night.

CAN I CONSIDER EMPLOYMENT?
Yes. You should avoid working in situations in which you may be exposed to heavy machinery or could harm yourself should seizure activity occur while at work, such as working the deep fryer at a fast food restaurant. If there is a chance you could have a seizure at work, it is best to tell your boss about your epilepsy, especially if a seizure could put you or someone else in danger.

ARE THERE ANY SPORTS WHICH I HAVE TO AVOID?
- Exercise and participation in sports are both beneficial and encouraged. Activities with little or no risk in which extra supervision is not needed include jogging (notify someone as to planned route and duration of run), aerobics, cross-country skiing, dancing, hiking, golf, ping-pong, bowling, soccer, field hockey (wear a helmet), most track and field events, tennis, and baseball (wear a helmet). Activities with moderate risk during which direct supervision is recommended include climbing a tree or jungle gym (have a spotter), swimming, horseback riding (wear a helmet), bike or skate-board riding (wear a helmet and avoid busy roads), canoeing (wear a life vest and helmet), ice skating or hockey (wear a helmet), gymnastics (always have a spotter), roller-blading (wear a helmet), downhill snow-skiing (wear a helmet) and football (wear a helmet). High risk activities to avoid include mountain or rock climbing, bungee jumping, scuba diving, skydiving, motor-racing,
• cave exploring, boxing, aviation and hang gliding. Direct adult supervision is required at all times when handling firearms. Many activities involved in hunting (early morning hunts, solitary hunting, climbing heights, distance from emergency assistance) place people with epilepsy at risk of injury.

**WHOM SHOULD I TELL ABOUT MY SEIZURES? WHAT SHOULD I SAY?**
You should tell your close friends you have seizures, even if you have not had a seizure in some time. You should tell someone you are dating about your epilepsy when you feel most comfortable. If your seizures are frequent, it is better to tell someone you are dating earlier in the relationship than later in case seizure activity occurs unexpectedly.

**HOW CAN I FIGHT THE ‘STIGMA’ AGAINST EPILEPSY?**
Being honest and open about your epilepsy and educating others helps fight the stigma against epilepsy. Education is a powerful tool to reach others, teach them about seizures and eliminate fears and myths about epilepsy.

**WHAT IF I HAVE SEIZURES IN FRONT OF STRANGERS?**
Seizures can be unpredictable. Wearing an epilepsy bracelet may help others identify your history of seizures if you are not with people who know you. You should not feel embarrassed or isolated by having seizures. You can explain it as a “temporary electrical storm of the brain” and reassure them that you are otherwise just fine.

**CAN I DRINK ALCOHOL OR USE OTHER RECREATIONAL DRUGS?**
It is illegal to drink alcohol under age 21 or use recreational drugs and both can precipitate seizures. You may also fail to take your antiepileptic medications if you are intoxicated or your judgment is impaired by drug use. It is best to avoid alcohol and recreational drug use altogether.

**CAN I OUTGROW MY SEIZURES DURING MY TEENAGE YEARS?**
It depends on what kind of epilepsy you have. Some types of epilepsy are outgrown and some teenagers take medication into adulthood.

**WILL MY EPILEPSY AFFECT DATING?**
If you don’t have seizures often, you may feel more comfortable not sharing your epilepsy right away with someone you are newly dating. Some teens fear their boyfriend or girlfriend will break up with them because of their epilepsy. Being honest and open about your epilepsy will help educate your significant other and minimize their fears.
ARE THERE ANY PARENTING CONCERNS FOR TEENAGERS WITH EPILEPSY?
Yes, parents of teenagers with epilepsy often struggle to allow their teen to be independent while wanting to protect them. Parents should encourage their teen to focus on activities they can do and remain connected with their peers to promote self-esteem. There is a “Toolkit for Parents of Teens with Epilepsy” and other resources that can be found at www.EFVA.org

AM I ABLE TO GET MARRIED AND HAVE CHILDREN?
Yes, you can get married. You should always tell your neurologist if you are trying to get pregnant or are pregnant, as some medications may affect your unborn baby.