

What effect does epilepsy have on people in their later years?

Source: Yennadiou, H and Wolverson, E. *The experience of epilepsy in later life: A qualitative exploration of illness representations. Epilepsy & Behavior. 2017; 70: 87 – 93*

Plain Language Summary

Epilepsy in later life, e.g. 65 years or more, is different to other age groups as people may have other existing health conditions (co-morbidities), may be coming to terms with the loss of their role in their family and society, may be going through retirement and/or may be experiencing the death of loved ones. Making a diagnosis of epilepsy is also difficult in this age group as symptoms are subtle, e.g. a blank stare or 'funny turn', and can be similar to other conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. It is therefore important to understand how epilepsy is experienced by people in their later years and how it impacts on their wellbeing, to better support them in the community.

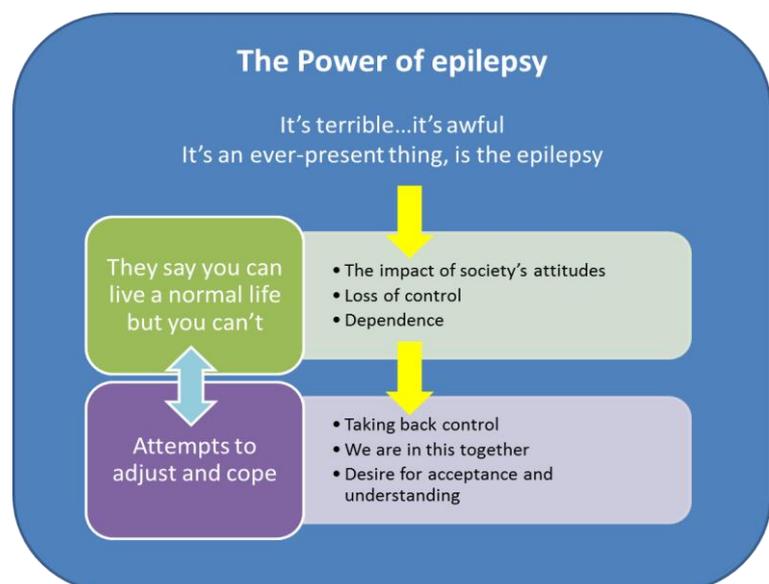
Researchers in the UK carried out a study to look at how people living with epilepsy in their later years feel about and experience their condition. Interviews were undertaken with 10 people over the age of 65, who had an average of 23 years since their diagnosis (ranging from 2 – 48 years). An analysis of the interviews showed:

- 3 major themes and 8 underlying subthemes overall (see figure below, adapted from page 89).
- 'The power of epilepsy' was the key theme found and it dominated all of the other themes. Epilepsy was described by people as an 'it' (e.g. separate to themselves) and a chronic, threatening, unpredictable and incurable condition.
- This theme was also found to affect the negative consequences of epilepsy (e.g. loss of control, dependence on others, impact of society's attitudes/stigma) and act as a barrier with attempts to adjust and cope with the condition.

These results signify that routine assessments in people in their later years with epilepsy should be performed. Psychological interventions, e.g. psychotherapy, support groups and educational programs should be made available to help people who experience distressing and threatening issues as a result of their condition.

Research studies have found that older people with epilepsy have poorer well-being compared to that of the general population.^{1, 2, 3} Higher

levels of depression, anxiety, lower thinking and processing (cognitive) function, and greater impaired sleep are all features identified in older people with epilepsy. Other studies have found



however that people in their later years may be more resilient and have a more favourable health profile.⁴

The existing evidence of the impact of epilepsy on quality of life in people in their later years is unclear and has received little attention in comparison to working age adults. This may be due to small samples of participants in studies and no validated assessment tool for quality of life specific to people in their later years.

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Additional Information

1. Baker, G et al. The quality of life of older people with epilepsy: findings from a UK community study. *Seizure*. 2001; 10: 92 – 9
2. McLaughlin, D et al. Stigma, seizure frequency and quality of life: the impact of epilepsy in late adulthood. *Seizure*. 2008; 17(3):281-7.
3. Laccheo, I, et al. Assessment of quality of life among the elderly with epilepsy. *Epilepsy & Behavior*. 2008; 12(2):257-61.
4. Pugh et al. Impact of epilepsy on health status among younger and older adults. *Epilepsia*. 2005; 46: 1820 – 7.