

Travelling, transport and epilepsy



Travel and transport, whether for leisure or day-to-day activity, is something that features heavily in most people's lives.

For some people with epilepsy and a cognitive disability it may mean that extra planning and precautions need to be taken to ensure enjoyable and safe travel and transport experiences.



Travel, transport and epilepsy

Being able to get around is important for everyone; whether that is to visit friends, attend a medical appointment or travel to another part of Australia or the world. A person might get around by driving a vehicle or using public transport. Travel away from home might see a person use other types of transport such as planes or boats.

Living with epilepsy and a cognitive disability does, however, mean a person may need to take extra precautions when travelling or using transport, particularly if they have regular seizures and/or use assistive devices such as a wheelchair or walker.

Some people with epilepsy and a cognitive disability are not permitted to drive a car or ride a motorbike. When this happens it is usually to ensure that the person and the public are safe and protected. Some people will never be able to apply for a licence due to the nature of their epilepsy or disability, or may have a licence temporarily suspended because of recent seizure activity.

What does this mean for the person?

Using public transport

Accessible and safe public transport is not only needed by people living with epilepsy but also by people with disabilities, pregnant women, children, parents using prams and older people.

To reduce risks, particularly if seizures are frequent, consider:

- travelling with a companion if using a route for the first time to get to know the location of stops and whether any safety measures are needed for the next time
- standing well back from the platform or road when waiting for a train, tram, bus or boat (particularly if wandering, confusion or falling are seizure features)
- bringing water to remain hydrated if the environment is hot
- dressing appropriately for travel conditions such as wearing warm clothes if it is cold.

Some people may be eligible to receive public transport concessions – speak to the public transport authority to find out more.

Driving

A 'Fitness to Drive' test is used to assess whether a person with epilepsy and a cognitive disability can safely hold a driver's licence or a learner's permit. These national guidelines are intended to protect the safety of the driver and the community. The period that a person must be seizure free before they may be allowed to drive depends on the type of epilepsy and the circumstances surrounding any recent seizures.

In general, a person with epilepsy can hold a driving licence or permit as long as seizures are well controlled. If a doctor determines that a person is not safe to drive, and they already hold a licence, it is the responsibility of the person to notify the driving authority in their state or territory. However, if a person's seizures become controlled and they meet the criteria to drive again the licence may be renewed.

Assessing fitness to drive is managed by each state and territory driving authority, and will require medical reports and assessments. For up-to-date driving regulations contact the state licensing authority.

Taxi and transport assistance

If a person cannot drive and has difficulty using or accessing public transport they may be eligible for taxi subsidy or Centrelink mobility allowance. Both of these assistance supports have strict criteria which must be met before they are approved. A person may also be eligible for travel and transport assistance as part of a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) package.

To find out more contact Centrelink, the state taxi subsidy scheme and the NDIS.

Travelling

When travelling, whether it is in Australia or overseas, there are a number of measures which can be taken to ensure time away is enjoyable and safe.

- All airplane companies are required to support the accessibility needs of travellers but it is important to make the company aware of any specific needs when booking. Information about policies and specific support can usually be found on the company's website.
- Medication must be taken at the usual times, so factor in any time differences.
- Take a doctor's letter detailing the epilepsy diagnosis, the name of the medications, how much is to be taken and that it is for personal use only. It is best to keep the medication in its original packaging.
- Have enough prescriptions to cover the time away from home if travelling in Australia or overseas. If travelling overseas it may be difficult to obtain medication in another country so it is a good idea to take enough medication to cover the entire journey, and an extra supply if possible.
- Pack medications in a clear plastic bag, stored in carry-on luggage. This will reduce the risk of the medications being lost in transit.

Be aware of seizure triggers (e.g. jetlag, tiredness, dehydration).

What can you do to help?

- Discuss appropriate ways of using public transport and consider travelling on new routes with the person to ensure they follow safety strategies.
- Support the person to apply for a taxi subsidy or mobility allowance if using taxis is a more appropriate means of transport. Support the person to include transport and travel support in an NDIS plan, if appropriate.
- Provide support to the person if they are overwhelmed or upset that they are not allowed to apply for a drivers licence or have their existing licence suspended. Remind them that it is because their seizure activity and/or other conditions may compromise the safety of them and the community.
- Support the person when completing a fitness to drive assessment, and if approved ensure the person receives adequate driving lessons prior to being tested.
- Discuss with the person what to do with their medications while away from home – how much to take and what they need to do to manage their medication while travelling.
- Encourage the person to visit their doctor for a check-up prior to travelling in Australia or overseas.

Where to go for further information:

Epilepsy Foundation www.epilepsyfoundation.org.au

Epilepsy Learning www.learning.epilepsyfoundation.org.au

Australian Government www.australia.gov.au

(Search: Public transport)

Department of Human Services www.humanservices.gov.au

(Search: Mobility Allowance)

Austroads www.austroads.com.au

(Search: Fitness to drive)

This information sheet is part of a suite of resources that are targeted to family members, carers and support workers, to assist with caring for people living with epilepsy and a cognitive disability.

The information contained in this publication provides general information about epilepsy. It does not provide specific advice. Specific health and medical advice should always be obtained from an appropriately qualified health professional.

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