

# Irish Water Safety Guidelines on Epilepsy

## Introduction

Most individuals with epilepsy will be under the care of a medical practitioner who may have provided advice concerning the safety of aquatic activity. **The guidance offered in this statement does not presume to override advice given by a medical practitioner.**

1. There is some debate as to how long an individual should be free from seizures before resuming water activities.

Guidance is offered by the Medical Commission of the International Lifesaving Federation.

- Persons with epilepsy are medically eligible for all water safety and lifeguarding awards, activities and competition provided they have been free of seizures for two years. This is irrespective of whether medications are being taken or not.
- When a lifeguard, acting on medical advice, stops taking anti-convulsant medications, the lifeguard should not participate in aquatic activities for a period of three months. Still water activities should be either supervised or held in the company of others who are aware of the circumstances.

In the case of lifeguards, however, there are legal implications. Beach and pool operators may require the attending doctor to state the lifeguard is fit and safe to perform his/her duties. This is the responsibility of the beach/pool operator.

2. Where a qualified lifeguard has a recurrence of seizures, individual circumstances dictate what further action is required.
  - Where the seizure is the result of omitted or forgotten medication, inadequate sleep or physical exhaustion, a further six months must elapse without seizure activity before water activities can be resumed.
  - Where the seizure has occurred following withdrawal of medication on medical advice a minimum period of one month must elapse before water activities can be resumed.
  - Where the seizure is the result of alcohol abuse, head injury or brain surgery, water activities may not be resumed for a further two years.
3. Where a qualified lifeguard develops epileptic seizures, a two-year period free from seizures will be required before water activities are allowed. Land based activities should be determined by the organisation medical adviser but in general may be allowed after one year free from seizures.

#### **4. For officials with epilepsy the advice is:**

- The official should be fit free for one year before operating independently. During this year, the official may participate in lifesaving activities but should be accompanied by a colleague who would be able to effect a rescue. If a swimmer requires rescue during a training session the person who is non-epileptic should enter the water to give assistance.
- After one year of being fit free, the official who has epilepsy may operate on the poolside independently. He/she should avoid situations that may trigger a fit, the most common two being flashing lights and cold water.

#### **5. The Medical Commission advises recreational swimmers with epilepsy:**

- If an unsupervised swimmer has a seizure in the water this may result in a fatal outcome.
- Open water swimming is more dangerous than swimming in a pool. The recommendations for open water swimming are therefore more stringent than for swimming pools.

## **Recommendations**

- i. Individuals who have epilepsy should not swim in open water unless they have been free of seizures for at least one year.**
- ii. They should not swim for at least three months after cessation of medications.**
- iii. They should not swim alone.** Companions should be aware of the potential for seizures and the possible need for rescue. Parents of children who have epilepsy must watch their charges at all times whilst swimming. They should only venture into shallow water on a gentle sloping beach with gentle small waves. Direct contact should be maintained at all times whether in open water or swimming pool.
- iv. They must not hyperventilate, this is particularly important prior to swimming and diving.**
- v. They should not engage in S.C.U.B.A diving.**
- vi. The advice given to board riders, surf ski and other craft users is similar to that for lifeguards.** In addition they are advised to surf with friends who are aware of their condition and are familiar with the principles of surf rescue and resuscitation.