

Epilepsy and Pregnancy

Epilepsy brings additional challenges for women that can impact getting pregnant, being pregnant, and breastfeeding. You and your doctor will work together to determine what is best for you and your family.

How does epilepsy impact women's reproductive health?

Two key hormones, **estrogen** [ES-truh-juh n] and **progesterone** [proh-JES-tuh-rohn], can either speed up or slow down the brain's electrical activity. When these hormones are not in balance, medications for preventing seizures, called **anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs)**, may or may not be as effective. In fact, AEDs may alter the levels of these key hormones, which further impacts seizures as well as the effectiveness of birth control. This can lead to unplanned pregnancies.

What is the health risk of an unplanned pregnancy?

Seizure medications can cause serious birth defects affecting the brain and spine within 24–28 days after conception, a time when most women do not yet know that they are pregnant. Folic acid (see page 2) has been shown to protect your baby from this risk.

Using birth control methods recommended by your doctor, taking folic acid, and planning your pregnancy with the care team are the best things you can do to have a healthy baby.

Before getting pregnant

Most women with epilepsy can become pregnant. For women with epilepsy, planning ahead for any pregnancy lets you work with your neurologist and epilepsy care team along with your obstetrician to plan your care.



What do I need to do right now?

- 1 Avoid unplanned pregnancy! Ask your doctor what types of birth control are best for you.
- 2 If you are of childbearing age, always take the recommended daily amount of folic acid (also called "folate") to prevent possible birth defects should you become pregnant (see page 2).
- 3 Talk to your doctor about your current seizure medicines right away if you are pregnant or have plans to become pregnant.
- 4 Access the Epilepsy Foundation's *Checklist for Working with your Health Care Team* at www.epilepsy.com/living-epilepsy/women/epilepsy-and-pregnancy/discussion-checklist

Challenges for starting a family can include having:

- Irregular periods — a side effect of some **anti-epileptic medicines (AEDs)**
- Reduced birth control effectiveness (also an AED side effect), which can cause problems with you and your doctors planning your care ahead of time
- **Polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS)**, which can happen when a women gains weight as a result of taking some AEDs
- A lower desire to have sex, which can happen when seizures occur in the brain area related to sex drive

Note: If a man has epilepsy, some AEDs can lower sperm production as well as sex drive, making it more difficult to conceive.

Before you become pregnant, work with your doctor to find the best doses and types of AEDs to take during pregnancy. Your doctor will also want you to take folic acid every day, which can help prevent birth defects (see [page 2](#) for more information).

During pregnancy

Most women who have epilepsy have healthy babies. Talk with your doctor about how to balance any risks of having seizures during pregnancy with the risks to your baby of taking anti-seizure medicines.

Having seizures while you are pregnant can cause:

- A decrease in a baby's oxygen supply and heart rate
- Injury or miscarriage from a fall during a seizure
- Preterm labor or premature birth

Taking AEDs reduces the risk of seizures, but some of these medicines can increase the risk of serious birth defects. Usually, the risk to your baby is greater if you have uncontrolled seizures than from AED side effects.

During pregnancy, you will need to see your doctor more often to more closely monitor your baby's health and development. It is also important to take your medicines exactly as directed as well as prenatal vitamins and a daily folic acid supplement (see below).

When breastfeeding

Research tells us that breastfeeding is important for your baby's emotional and physical development AND is usually safe for women taking AEDs. Talk with your doctor about taking your medication right after you breastfeed to minimize the AED transferred to your breast milk.



Where can I learn more?

About seizures, medications, and pregnancy:

The Epilepsy Foundation (<https://www.epilepsy.com/living-epilepsy/women/epilepsy-and-pregnancy/seizures-medications-and-pregnancy>)

About folic acid (folate):

- Centers for Disease Control: <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/folicacid/index.html>
- MedlinePlus: medlineplus.gov/folicacid.html

Folic acid (folate): Protecting your baby from birth defects

What is it?

Folic acid is a man-made form of vitamin B9, which helps cells grow and repair.

Why do I need it?

While everyone needs folic acid, women of childbearing age should take at least 400 mcg (0.4 mg) every day. For those with epilepsy, anti-seizure medications (AEDs) lower the body's folic acid. This can lead to disabling and even life-threatening brain and spinal birth defects that occur in the first month after conception.

How much should I take?

Epilepsy doctors typically suggest taking 400 to 4000 mcg (0.4–4 mg) of folic acid daily if you have epilepsy and are of childbearing age, even if you don't plan on becoming pregnant. Women who have additional risks — such as a family history of a neural tube defect or have diabetes with high blood sugar — might need to take more folic acid and be monitored frequently during pregnancy.

What are good sources of folic acid?

- **Vitamins:** Most adult multivitamins have at least 400 mcg of folic acid. **DO NOT** take children's multivitamins as they typically don't have enough folic acid.
- **Diet:** Foods that are rich in folic acid are leafy green vegetables, fruits, dried beans, peas, and nuts, and enriched breads, cereals, and other grain products.

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