



Epilepsy & Complications of the Flu;

Q&A with Michael D. Privitera, M.D., president of the American Epilepsy Society and professor of Neurology at the University of Cincinnati

1) Does the flu create complications for people with epilepsy?

Yes, any time someone with epilepsy has another illness, the threshold for seizures can be changed. No one fully understands why this is. It may be that the flu causes other better known seizure triggers, like increased stress or sleep deprivation, thereby making a seizure more likely. It may also be that the illness itself causes seizures to be more likely. In rare cases a virus can infect the brain causing what's known as encephalitis, which can be associated with seizures even in someone who does not have epilepsy. In children, fever is associated with seizures, but it's not clear whether fever itself is a seizure trigger in adults.

2) What are some of the complications from the flu for people with epilepsy?

One concern with the flu is that people often experience nausea and vomiting. If someone has epilepsy and is so sick from the flu they cannot keep their medication down, that can certainly trigger a seizure. Some over the counter medications people often use for colds or flu can interact with seizure medication or just make it more likely to have a seizure, so anyone with epilepsy should consult their doctor before taking any medication for the flu. We often are asked if it's safe to get the flu vaccine if you have epilepsy. The answer I give is that it is much more dangerous for someone to get the flu (as described above) than the very small risk of seizures due the flu vaccine. If someone with epilepsy does get the flu, that person should take extra precautions in case a seizure occurs.

3) What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is the most common and potentially devastating neurological disease that affects people across the lifespan. In America, one in 26 people will be diagnosed with epilepsy at some time in the course of their life - more will experience an isolated seizure. Epilepsy is associated with significant morbidity and mortality and carries an increased risk of many co-morbidities including depression, cognitive dysfunction, and autism. Today between 2.2 and 3 million Americans, including almost 400,000 children, live with epilepsy, with one third living with treatment-resistant seizures that do not respond to current medications.