

Accommodating an Employee with Epilepsy

Epilepsy is considered a disability and as such it is covered under the Ontario Human Rights Code and the Canadian Human Rights Code. It is a requirement that employees with disabilities must be provided with workplace accommodations if they identify the need, **UNLESS the disability interferes with performing essential duties of the job** (for example driving a bus or flying a plane). Each person with epilepsy is an individual and will need different accommodations, but the following is a list of potential accommodation strategies that can be used to initiate a positive and collaborative conversation between the employee and the employer about what may be best suited for that particular person.

Many clients do not require any accommodation at work, while others may require accommodations to help them avoid triggers, ensure they remain safe if they have a seizure on the job, or help them adapt to seizure or medication side effects. Workplace accommodations for epilepsy are inexpensive, easy to make, and only require creativity and flexibility.

Reassuring concerned employers

Employers are sometimes concerned about issues of safety, reliability and liability if an employee or job applicant has epilepsy. But these concerns are not valid. In fact, studies have shown that the performance, cooperation, productivity and stability of employees with epilepsy are equal to or greater than that of employees without epilepsy. Absenteeism rates are lower too because workers with epilepsy practice good self-care and strive to avoid illness.

Accident rates for employees with epilepsy are lower too: 0.6% vs. 1.92% for other employees. Some studies have even revealed that employees with epilepsy work more attentively and productively than others, as they often try harder to prove themselves at work. As for an employer's liability, people with epilepsy are covered by the Workers Compensation Board, whose rates are not tied to employee disabilities. It is not more "expensive" to have people with epilepsy on staff.

Discussing employee accommodations

Use this guide to discuss with the employee whether each area is a challenge that impacts them and if they will need accommodation in this area. Not everyone with epilepsy will require all, or any, of the following accommodations.



Cognitive impairments

These impairments could include memory challenges, time management difficulties, challenges with attention and organization, and difficulty with stress management.

- **Memory:** Epilepsy can impact a person's memory, which can affect their ability to complete tasks, remember job duties, or recall daily actions or activities. This could be caused by a side-effect from medications or from seizure activity.
- **Time Management:** Epilepsy may make it difficult for people to manage time, which can affect their ability to complete tasks within a specified timeframe. It may also be difficult to prepare for, or to begin, some work activities.
- **Stress Management:** Stress Management: If stress is not properly managed, it can lead to increased seizure frequency and intensity. Situations that create stress can vary from person to person, but could likely involve heavy workload, unrealistic timeframes, shortened deadlines, or conflict among coworkers.

Memory accommodations

For an employee who is experiencing difficulty with memory, consider providing information and instructions in different formats, such as written in notebooks, agendas, calendars, verbal cues, as well as audio recordings. Written passwords can be securely stored and charts can be used to break complicated tasks into steps. Employees can also obtain training refreshers and organize and label information at their desks, including things like "inbox", "outbox", "to-dos", etc. Remembering the names and contact information of other employees can be supported through nametags and door/cubical labels, as well as providing an employee directory with pictures, and using auto-dial phone features to connect quickly to frequently used numbers.

It can be easier to remember things that are separated into categories or groups, or when they are organized. For example, a list of words can be remembered more easily if they are separated into categories such as clothing, food, colours, etc. Verbal repetition, highlighting, colour coding, mnemonic strategies, and actively working with the material that needs to be remembered can also be helpful, such as by asking questions, or thinking through examples.

Lastly, it is important to stay calm when trying to remember something as it will be more difficult to remember information when a person is not feeling calm.

Time management accommodations

For an employee who is experiencing difficulty with time management, it may be helpful to encourage them to establish a routine and use a wall or electronic calendar/organizer for tasks and due dates, as well as set an alarm as a reminder to start, switch, or complete tasks, and divide larger assignments into smaller parts. It may also be helpful for the employee to maintain a checklist of assignments, and for employers to be flexible and negotiate priorities. If employees have difficulty with concentrating or maintaining their attention, it can be helpful to adjust the environment so that there are fewer distractions. Employees can also be encouraged to focus on challenging activities at the beginning of the day instead of later in the day and to use regularly scheduled breaks.

Accommodations for stress management

Employees who are struggling with stress management may need emotional support through recognition of achievements and providing positive reinforcement, as well as referrals to employee assistance programs and support phone calls to doctors or others, and provision of sensitivity training for other employees. The employee may also be supported through modification of their work schedule, taking scheduled breaks, and setting realistic targets and timelines for completing work. Employees can help themselves with stress by ensuring that they maintain a healthy diet, regular sleep schedule, and learn to cope with stress through using strategies such as exercise, music, and keeping a positive attitude.

Motor impairments

Motor impairments may include challenges with driving, balancing, climbing, fatigue, and the need to ensure safety “in the field”.

- Driving: Depending on the nature of the seizures and the province, there may be implications for driving.
- Ensuring Safety in the Field/Office: Take some universal precautions to ensure safety while working at or away from the office.
- Balancing/Climbing: For some people, their epilepsy can impose restrictions on balancing or climbing.
- Fatigue: can be an issue for some people either, due to a side effect of medications or to recent seizure activity.

If an employee has difficulty with driving due to their seizures, consider arranging supports at work such as a carpool or a transportation buddy, or allowing the employee to take a train or taxi in lieu of driving themselves. Employers can also adjust an employee's work schedule so that they can take public transportation, rework their job description so that driving is not an essential function, or allow them to do their work from home through virtual meetings and phone calls.

Accommodating employees in the field

When an employee is working “in the field” or out of the office, employers should be prepared for any adverse events and have a plan of action to determine how to respond/react when the employee has a seizure in the field and consider what to say, to whom, and when if disclosure to a customer is warranted. Where AODA compliant workplace emergency response information has been created for the most common worksite, consideration should be given to creating a similar plan for frequently visited corporate or customer sites in the field. For every seizure, complete a Report of Workplace Seizure Incident. Employers can also allow employees to spend less time in the field or work from home during periods of unusual seizure activity. Employees working away from the office or regular work facility should keep a list of emergency contacts in a place readily accessible to emergency responders, program an ICE (in case of emergency) number into their phone and carry personal business cards with office contact information.

When an employee is working in the office or facility, the environment should be kept clear of clutter, offer a quick, unobstructed exit, have clearly marked directions for exits, fire doors, etc., and be free of loud noises, noxious fumes, or intense heat. Employers should ensure there is a seizure response/management plan in place, which is kept in a location familiar to the designated emergency responder i.e. the red binder on my desk or in the Human Resources area. The seizure response plan should include when to call 911 or emergency contacts (and the emergency contacts themselves), having one designated person and a back up to respond to seizure incidents and advise everyone, and ensuring that there is a pillow, blanket and a folding cot or sofa located in a quiet area nearby.

Additionally, employers should create AODA compliant workplace emergency response information (for persons with disabilities) i.e. building evacuation and for every

seizure, complete a Report of Workplace Seizure Incident. Employers may also install a visual or audible alarm which can be activated during an aura or just prior to a generalized seizure, and assist the employee in discontinuing activity such as carrying, climbing, or driving if indicated. Employees may also need the option to work modified job duties or to work from home during periods of unusual seizure activity.

Accommodating balance difficulties

Employees who have difficulty with balancing or climbing can be supported through changes in the physical work environment that could include installing guards on machines, using rolling safety ladders with handrails and locking casters, and using rubber matting on floor and adding padding to corners and edges at the workstation to cushion a fall. Employers should also provide head and eye protection, encourage fall protection, and consider reworking an employee's job description so that climbing and balancing activities are not included. When an employee is expected to climb or balance, they should not be expected to work alone, and employers should respect that an employee may decline some tasks where they feel their health and safety or that of others could be in jeopardy.

Fatigue accommodations

For employees struggling with fatigue, employers can provide flexible start or ending times, adjust the work week, provide anti-fatigue matting for the floor, encourage the use of scheduled breaks, allowing longer breaks during extended work days, and where travel over great distances is required, allow a reasonable length of time to adjust before commencing work. It is also important to not schedule an excessive number of external meetings or customer visits in a day, and to consider having another employee check over critical work applications.

Sensory impairments

- Photosensitivity: Light sources such as computer screens or fluorescent lights can bring on seizures or headaches in those people who are light or photosensitive.
- Seeing/Hearing/Communicating: During or after seizures, a person may temporarily have limited ability to see, hear, or speak.

Photosensitivity accommodations

Employees who have challenges with photosensitivity can be supported with a flicker-free monitor (LCD display), a monitor glare guard, and by being allowed frequent breaks from tasks involving the computer. Employers can also provide alternative light sources: i.e. full spectrum light or natural light instead of electric light although blinds should be available if the natural light gets too intense.

Communication accommodations

If an employee is having difficulty with seeing/hearing/communicating, ensure that they are given time to recuperate from a seizure, and find other ways to communicate with the person. Alternative methods of communication could involve using hand signals or other universal signals, offering two-way radios with texting options, using paging systems to communicate with coworkers, using electronic means of sending text messages, emails, tweets. Employees may also choose to use simple 'tapping codes' on the phone if they have had a night of seizures and need to phone into work to report their status but can't speak.

Employee attendance and absenteeism

Seizure activity can affect a person's attendance at work. Despite this, research shows that people with epilepsy usually have no more work absences than people who do not have epilepsy.

To support an employee with epilepsy related absences, employers should record disability and non-disability absences separately, offer flexible schedules, provide leave when an employee is adjusting to medications, and allow the opportunity to work straight shifts, rather than rotating shifts. Employees should also be allowed the opportunity to make up time lost due to seizures or medical appointments. If possible, the employee should be allowed to remain on the job after a seizure.

Personal care

During or after a seizure, people with epilepsy may exhibit behaviours such as crying, drooling, spitting, or urinating. As a result, the person may need time following a seizure to engage in activities of daily living such as grooming and changing clothes.

When it comes to personal care, employees should be allowed to keep a change of clothes with them at all times. Employers should provide disability awareness/sensitivity training to coworkers and management and ensure that there is a complete first aid kit nearby.

The following information provided was sourced from Epilepsy Toronto.