

ask the experts

Q | I had epilepsy as a child but have been seizure-free for years. I'm pregnant and am worried that my baby might have epilepsy. Is epilepsy hereditary?

A | Living with epilepsy probably hasn't been easy and it's perfectly normal for you to fear that your child will have it, too. While there is a chance that genetics play a role in epilepsy, there are many women who have epilepsy, but whose children don't.

Though most children will not inherit epilepsy, the chances of inheriting it are slightly higher for some types of the condition. Epilepsy syndromes, such as benign childhood epilepsy with centrotemporal spikes (which are typically resolved before the age of 16); benign partial epilepsy in infancy (which is typically resolved by the age of three); and childhood epilepsy with occipital paroxysms show slight signs of being hereditary.

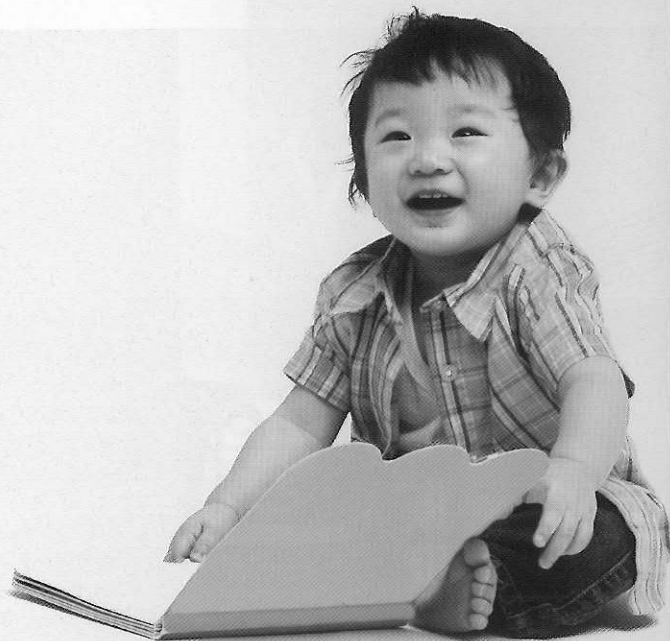
Since you haven't had a seizure for years, it is likely that you had one of the benign syndromes. So, even if there is a chance that your baby might have the same kind of epilepsy, the prognosis is very good that she'll outgrow it, too.

As difficult as it might be, try not to dwell on this. As emotional well-being affects physical health, it is imperative that you try to stay positive and avoid stress during pregnancy.

Q | My two-year-old son has been diagnosed with epilepsy. Is he now more likely to have learning disabilities?

A | Like every child, a child with epilepsy has his own individual abilities, strengths and weaknesses. Generally speaking, having epilepsy shouldn't hinder your son's potential to achieve in academics, sports or creative pursuits. Many people with epilepsy lead normal, successful lives.

If your child's seizures are mild and/or well-controlled by medication, he should be fine. However, there can be side-effects from anti-epileptic medicines, including tiring easily and/or decreased concentration. When your child starts school, keep in touch with his teachers to work together towards his best interests.




If your child has severe, uncontrolled seizures and/or other disabilities that severely impair physical or mental functions, then he is likely to experience some learning difficulties. An early intervention plan is essential and beneficial for such children.

It's important to treat your child with epilepsy the same as your other children and resist becoming over-protective. Help him build confidence so he can deal with difficult situations as he grows. Finally, please remember that every child is full of potential.

Q | My baby has been diagnosed with infantile spasms. Did I do something wrong during pregnancy?

A | First of all, please do not blame yourself. Infantile spasms do not necessarily start at birth. Even babies who are healthy at birth can develop problems at four to five months. The causes include inborn errors of metabolism, malformations of the cortex, and brain injury from infection or trauma. There are no other known causes, so it is unlikely that you did anything wrong during your pregnancy.

Infantile spasms is among the most challenging of childhood epilepsies due to the difficulty in controlling seizures. Caring for a baby with infantile spasms can be stressful. A specially trained social worker can support you, and connect you with other parents in Hong Kong whose babies also have infantile spasms. 

Enlighten-Action for Epilepsy is a Hong Kong-based charity that aims to raise awareness and improve the quality of lives of those affected by epilepsy. Learn more at www.enlightenhk.org, or call 2820 0111.

Epilepsy is one of the most common neurological conditions and people with epilepsy usually have recurrent seizures. Though most people only think of the "tonic-clonic" seizure, where the person's body stiffens and he/she falls to the ground, there are actually almost 40 different types of epileptic seizures.