

Fear of public places is common in adults with epilepsy, says study

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About 5.1 million people in the U.S. have a history of epilepsy, which causes repeated seizures. According to the Epilepsy Foundation, epilepsy is the fourth most common neurological disorder. While current research

has shown an increase in anxiety and depression among people with epilepsy, little is known about this population and agoraphobia, an anxiety disorder that involves the fear of being in a public place or in a situation that might cause panic or embarrassment.

However, a recent study from Heidi Munger Clary, M.D., M.P.H., associate professor of neurology at Wake Forest University School of Medicine, shows that phobic and agoraphobic symptoms are common and associated with poor quality of life in people with epilepsy.

The study appears online in *Epilepsy Research*.

"We know that agoraphobia can lead to delays in [patient care](#) because of a reluctance to go out in public, which includes appointments with [health care providers](#)," said Munger Clary, the study's principal investigator.

"So, this is an area that needs more attention in [clinical practice](#)."

In the study, researchers conducted a cross-sectional analysis of baseline [clinical data](#) from a neuropsychology registry cohort study. Researchers analyzed a diverse sample of 420 adults, ages 18 to 75, with epilepsy who underwent neuropsychological evaluation over a 14-year period at Columbia University Medical Center in New York.

"More than one-third of the participants reported significant phobic/agoraphobic symptoms," Munger Clary said. "We also found that phobic/agoraphobic symptoms, along with depression symptoms, were independently associated with poor quality of life, but generalized anxiety symptoms were not."

According to Munger Clary, because phobic/agoraphobic symptoms are not routinely assessed by clinicians, the findings may suggest a need for future studies to develop more comprehensive screeners for psychiatric comorbidity in epilepsy.

"Symptoms of agoraphobia do not fully overlap with [generalized anxiety](#) or depression symptoms that are often screened in routine practice," Munger Clary said. "Providers might want to consider more robust symptom screening methods to identify and better assist these patients. This may be important to improve health equity, given other key study findings that show those with lower education and non-white race/ethnicity had increased odds of significant phobic/agoraphobic symptoms."

More information: Heidi M. Munger Clary et al, Afraid to go out: Poor quality of life with phobic anxiety in a large cross-sectional adult epilepsy center sample, *Epilepsy Research* (2023). DOI: [10.1016/j.eplepsyres.2023.107092](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eplepsyres.2023.107092)

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