The Women with Epilepsy Clinical Care Program
Addressing the Unique Needs of Women with Epilepsy

The Comprehensive Epilepsy Care Center at North Shore-LIJ has been one of the major providers of epilepsy care on Long Island and in Queens for more than 25 years. Together with the Katz Institute for Women's Health (KIWH), part of North Shore-LIJ Health System, we are able to treat women with epilepsy through a wide range of health services to maximize quality of life and preserve childbearing ability.

The Women with Epilepsy Clinical Care Program

KIWH has developed a new program that brings together the specialists of the Comprehensive Epilepsy Care Center and the Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine to provide specialized care for women with epilepsy. This program offers a team of epilepsy-trained neurologists, obstetricians and geneticists available for consultation and ongoing care while planning and during pregnancy, as well as after, including guidance for appropriate birth control. Our team provides monthly contacts, either in person or by phone (and more frequently if needed), with pregnant women to monitor their health at this important time of life.
What Is Epilepsy?
Epilepsy is a brain disorder that causes a person to experience repeated seizures, or convulsions, over time. A seizure sends a sudden surge of electrical activity into the brain, causing changes in attention or behavior.

Can Epilepsy Be Treated?
Many people with epilepsy live without seizures because medication is available that can completely control their occurrence. A specialist called an epileptologist works with people with epilepsy to find the best combination of medication to eliminate your seizures with minimum side effects.

What If Medication Cannot Control Seizures?
When seizures are not completely controlled with medication, surgery should be considered. This is because the earlier surgery is performed, the better the results. The epileptologist helps decide whether surgery is right for you. There are many types of epilepsy surgery, and a neurosurgeon specializing in this kind of surgery can discuss the risks and benefits of different surgical options.

The Comprehensive Epilepsy Center at CNI has developed minimally invasive surgical treatments, including laser therapy.

How Does Epilepsy Affect Women?
There are several issues that affect only women with epilepsy at different stages of their lives.

- **Women of childbearing age:** Some kinds of epilepsy begin at puberty. Epilepsy and menstruation can influence each other, with many women with epilepsy experiencing seizures just before their menstrual period, or at mid-menstrual cycle.

- **Pregnant women:** Severe seizures during pregnancy could cause a pregnant woman to fall and hurt her unborn child. Also, several drugs that prevent seizures also carry risks to the fetus and require special counseling and precautions for pregnant women.

- **Menopausal women:** In some women, epilepsy causes menopause to occur at an earlier age. The frequency and severity of seizures are affected by the hormonal changes of menopause.
With some women, the highest risk for breakthrough (seizures that occur despite the use of antiepileptic drugs) is either at the time of ovulation or right before menses, when the estrogen/progesterone ratio is at its peak. Treatment strategies can include progesterone therapy, contraceptive therapy, variable antiepileptic drug dosing, use of benzodiazepines and acetazolamide therapy.

Additional effects of epilepsy include:

- **A decrease in bone density** because a side effect of antiepileptic drugs is a change in bone mineral metabolism. What this means is that the health of your bones can be affected, resulting in a greater risk of getting osteoporosis and fractures.

- **Depression and anxiety**, which women (and men) often experience. We have staff that can discuss these issues with you.

- **Changes to other parts of your life**, including sexuality and intimacy, marriage, pregnancy, child rearing, employment and independence.

### What Else Should Women Know About Epilepsy?

- More than 90 percent of women with epilepsy have a normal pregnancy.

- Breastfeeding is generally safe. Commonly reported problems occur with sedating antiepileptic drugs.

- Women with epilepsy should have normal sexual interest, but sometimes the antiepileptic drugs may interfere with libido and could be adjusted.

- Driving is permitted in all states after a variable period of complete seizure freedom. Typically, the waiting period is six months to one year of being seizure free because of antiepileptic drugs.

- Antiepileptic drugs can be associated with either an increase or a reduction in body weight, although most medications are weight neutral.
Recommendations for women with epilepsy:

- Deciding on the best contraceptive regimen is important and one of most challenging decisions to make. Interactions between hormonal birth control methods, including oral contraceptive pills, and antiepileptic medications may result in reduced effectiveness of the birth control. This decision requires both the neurologist and the OB/GYN to participate in the discussion to decide the best contraceptive regimen.

- Monitor for seizure control closely and report any altered seizure patterns so that the need for a specific intervention in association with menstrual cycling can be assessed.

- All women of childbearing potential should take folic acid supplements.

- Women with epilepsy should have a discussion with their neurologist before pregnancy to make sure they are taking the safest possible antiepileptic medication regimen.

- Women should get their recommended daily allowance of calcium and vitamin D and should discuss with their doctor the need to undergo a bone mineral density screening.

Comprehensive Specialized Care to Treat Complex Epilepsy and Its Consequences

Our Pregnancy and Epilepsy Clinical Care Program offers a wide range of services beyond typical epilepsy care, with specialists trained in:

- **Neurology** — Our epilepsy center clinicians offer a variety of medical and surgical treatment options for the control and prevention of seizures. Treatments are based on an individualized assessment of the nature, type and severity of your disorder.

- **OB/GYN** — According to the Epilepsy Foundation, more than 90 percent of the babies born to women with epilepsy are normal and healthy. We offer early and ongoing prenatal care for women with epilepsy who are planning to have children — as well as advice for women who are not yet ready to have children.

- **Genetics** — Some types of epilepsy are inherited. Genetic counseling can determine whether epilepsy runs in your family.

- **Behavioral and social work** — Having epilepsy could add to psychological and behavioral problems, even if seizures are well controlled. Our specialists are trained to help you with mental health issues including depression, anxiety and personality disorders — and how these issues affect your family and those around you.
About North Shore-LIJ Health System
One of the nation's largest health systems, North Shore-LIJ delivers world-class clinical care throughout the New York metropolitan area, pioneering research at The Feinstein Institute for Medical Research and a visionary approach to medical education highlighted by the Hofstra North Shore-LIJ School of Medicine. North Shore-LIJ cares for people at every stage of life at 17 hospitals and nearly 400 outpatient physician practices throughout the region. North Shore-LIJ's owned hospitals and long-term care facilities house more than 6,000 beds, employ more than 10,000 nurses and have affiliations with more than 9,400 physicians. With a workforce of more than 47,000, North Shore-LIJ is the largest private employer in New York State. For more information, go to NorthShoreLIJ.com.

Make an Appointment Today
If you are a woman with epilepsy or who may have epilepsy and you’d like to make an appointment with the Comprehensive Epilepsy Care Center, call (516) 325-7060 or email us at neuro@nshs.edu. You can also visit our website at Neurocni.com.

The Comprehensive Epilepsy Center is actively researching issues for women with epilepsy, including fertility and pregnancy risks.

If you wish to participate in an epilepsy study, please contact our clinical research coordinator at (516) 325-7022.