Title: COVID-19 vaccination-related exacerbation of seizures in persons with epilepsy

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Presented at the Australian and New Zealand Association of Neurologist Annual Scientific Meeting, Melbourne, 10-13 May 2022
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Dr Dunne – study concept and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation, drafted and revised manuscript, statistical analyses.

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Highlights

- COVID-19 vaccinations are generally well tolerated by patients with epilepsy
Only a small proportion of doses (2%) result in COVID-19 vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation, even in a
The risk of serious seizure complications (e.g. status epilepticus, injury) associated with COVID-19 vaccine-associated seizures is low.

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Abstract

Although vaccines are generally safe in persons with epilepsy (PWE), seizures can be associated with vaccination, including COVID-19. This study assessed the occurrence of COVID-19 vaccination-related seizure exacerbations in PWE.

Adult PWE who had received a COVID-19 vaccine were consecutively recruited at a tertiary epilepsy clinic between June 2021 and April 2022. Patient demographics, including epilepsy history, vaccination details and reported adverse effects were recorded. Seizure exacerbation, defined as occurring within one week of vaccination, was assessed.

530 PWE received the COVID-19 vaccine. 75% received the Comirnaty (Pfizer) vaccine as their initial dose. Most patients (72%) were taking ≥2 antiseizure medications (ASM) and had focal epilepsy (73%). One third were 12-months seizure free at their first vaccination. 13 patients (2.5%) reported seizure exacerbation following their first vaccination, three of whom required admission. None were seizure-free at baseline. Six of these patients (46%) had a further exacerbation of seizures with their second vaccine. An additional four patients reported increased seizures only with the second vaccine dose.

Seizure exacerbations are infrequently associated with COVID-19 vaccination, mainly in patients with ongoing seizures. The likelihood of COVID-19 infection complications in PWE clearly outweighs the risk of vaccination-related seizure exacerbations.

Keywords
Introduction

Twelve months after the national coronavirus-19 (COVID-19) vaccination rollout in Australia, over 94% of the population over 16 years old were fully vaccinated.¹ Some people have reservations about the vaccination, including patients with epilepsy (PWE) despite the established safety of similar vaccinations in PWE.² There are multiple factors that may have fuelled vaccination hesitancy, including safety concerns, lack of trust in the information provided by government and pharmaceutical companies as well as conflicting opinions on social media platforms.³-⁴ For PWE, one of the most common concerns contributing to vaccination hesitancy has been the potential for seizure exacerbation.⁵-⁷

Several small reports have assessed the safety of the COVID-19 vaccine in PWE over the past 12 months. Two initial studies from Germany and Kuwait surveyed 52 and 82 patients respectively after their first COVID-19 vaccine within a month of the vaccine becoming available.⁵,⁶ Neither study demonstrated significant vaccine-related seizure exacerbations.⁵,⁶ The few patients who had a vaccine-related seizure exacerbation were predominantly female, older and on multiple antiseizure medications (ASM). However, given the small sample, the significance of these factors could not be assessed.⁵,⁶ A recent study from China assessed COVID-19 vaccine take-up and vaccine side effects, including seizure exacerbation, in PWE compared to healthy controls and patients with neuropsychiatric comorbidities.⁷ Only 204 of 491 PWE were vaccinated. Whilst the incidence of adverse effects comparing PWE and controls was no
different, 19 patients (9.3%) reported an exacerbation of seizures, but the
details provided were limited.  

Given ongoing uncertainty and the importance of providing COVID-19
vaccination to PWE we aimed to assess the likelihood of COVID-19
vaccination-related seizure exacerbations in PWE and identify possible
predictors.

**Materials and Methods**
PWE aged ≥18 years who had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine
were consecutively recruited from a tertiary hospital epilepsy clinic in
Perth, Western Australia, between June 2021 and April 2022. All enrolled
patients had confirmed epilepsy based on clinical assessment and
investigations, including neuroimaging (CT and/or MRI brain), routine
EEG and in many cases prolonged video EEG monitoring prior to their
first vaccine dose. Patients who did not have epilepsy were excluded.
However, patients who had known epilepsy but concurrent psychogenic
non-epileptic spells (PNES) clearly distinguishable from their epileptic
seizures were included. Patient demographics, including age, gender,
epilepsy characteristics, baseline seizure frequency and current antiseizure
medications (ASMs) were recorded.

A paper-based survey assessing COVID-19 vaccination status and
associated complications, including vaccine-related seizure exacerbations,
was conducted during the in-person routine clinic appointments and was
completed by the patient and/or their support person (in cases where the
patient was unable to complete the survey; i.e. intellectual disability) and
the treating clinician. For patients requiring telephone-based appointments,
often due to COVID restrictions or remote rural settings, the treating
clinician conducted the survey via phone call and completed the paper-
based form. Additional information about seizure-related admission was
obtained through the computerised state-wide public hospital medical
records system. The majority of patients documented their vaccine doses on the initial survey during a single clinic attendance. For patients who had multiple clinic reviews during the data-collection period and obtain sequential vaccine doses after their first survey, a second survey was completed to capture relevant information regarding their subsequent doses.

Seizure exacerbations were documented based on patient’s self-reported seizures (i.e. survey results and clinic reviews) or hospital presentations with seizures, seizure-related injuries or status epilepticus. They were defined as an increase in seizures within one week of vaccination compared to the patient’s baseline seizure frequency by utilising seizure diaries and as determined by the treating clinician. Occurrence of other seizure-like events, including syncope and PNES, which were clarified by clinical assessment and where necessary EEG, was not considered a seizure exacerbation. Patients were also excluded if other external factors unrelated to vaccination were likely responsible for the seizure exacerbation (e.g. ASM non-compliance), based on clinical assessment by the treating epileptologist, at the time the survey was conducted. If a patient had a vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation, the timing and nature of increased seizures, treatment requirement and need for hospital presentation or admission were recorded. The demographics and clinical features of PWE who developed COVID-19 vaccine-related seizure exacerbations were compared to those without seizure exacerbation.

Comparisons between groups were conducted using \( t \) tests for normally distributed data and Mann-Whitney tests for non-normal data. Chi-square and Fisher exact tests were used for categorical data.

This study was approved by the Fiona Stanley Hospital Human Research Ethics Committee. Verbal consent was obtained from all patients.
Results

Patient demographics and clinical features (Table 1)

530 PWE who had received the COVID-19 vaccine were identified over the 10-month recruitment period. Most patients (73%) had focal epilepsy and 145 patients (27%) had symptomatic generalised epilepsy (SGE). 177 patients (33%) had been seizure free for 12 months at the time of their first vaccination. 222 of 353 patients (63%) with ongoing seizures at baseline had multiple seizures a month. Median number of ASM was 2, with 72% of patients taking 2 or more ASM.

516 (97%) received two COVID-19 vaccine doses. 14 patients only received a single dose for various reasons, including wait required for second dose at time of survey and patient choice. 400 patients (75%) of patients received the Pfizer Comirnaty vaccine as their initial dose, reflecting vaccine availability in Western Australia. Median age at first vaccine was 38 years (range 16 – 84 years, interquartile range 25).

Seizure exacerbation after first COVID-19 vaccine dose

13 patients (2.5%) reported a clear exacerbation of seizures following their first vaccination. None were seizure free at the time of their initial vaccination, compared to 34% of the control cohort (p=0.006). Their demographics were otherwise similar to those without seizure exacerbation, including vaccination brand and number of ASM (Table 1).

Ten of the 13 patients (77%) with a seizure exacerbation reported increasing seizures within 24 hours of their first vaccine dose, and the remainder within 72 hours. Six patients had a cluster of multiple seizures, with five patients reporting several consecutive days of increased recurrent seizures. One patient developed convulsive status epilepticus, which terminated with out-of-hospital midazolam prior to arrival to in the emergency department (ED). No patient required intensive care admission.

Five patients (38%) presented to hospital because of seizure exacerbation post vaccination: two were discharged from ED after a short period of
observation and three patients required hospital admission for 1 to 3 days. One patient sustained a seizure-related injury (foot fracture) which was conservatively managed. ASM were escalated in only two patients, with increases of their regular ASM dosing and commencement of a short course of additional clobazam.

Five of the 13 (38%) had concurrent vaccination-related side effects including fatigue, fever and headache. This was similar to the systemic side effect rate of the whole cohort (30.6%) One patient with type 1 diabetes mellitus reported vomiting and diarrhoea leading to metabolic disturbance and hypoglycaemia, contributing to their seizure exacerbation.

**Seizure exacerbation after second COVID-19 vaccine dose**

All 13 patients with seizure exacerbation after the first vaccination received a second vaccination. Six of the 13 patients (46%) reported an increase of seizures after their second vaccination, including the single patient who had received pre-emptive clobazam. Median time from second vaccine to seizure exacerbation was 1 day (range 1-7 days), with 4 of 6 patients having a seizure increase within 24 hours of their second vaccine dose. Only one patient reported an increase in seizures occurring over multiple days. None of these patients presented to hospital or required ASM escalation to manage their seizures.

A further four patients reported a vaccine-related seizure exacerbation only occurring after their second dose. The clinical features of these patients were similar to those who reported seizure exacerbations after the first vaccine; none were seizure-free at baseline. Median time from vaccine to seizure was 3.5 days (range 0 – 7 days) with half reporting seizure exacerbation within 24 hours of their second vaccine. Three of these four patients reported concurrent vaccine side effects, mild in all but one with high fevers and hypotension. Two patients (50%) presented to hospital, with one requiring multiday admission and ASM escalation.

**Discussion**
Of 1,046 COVID-19 vaccine doses administered in 530 PWE (530 initial doses and 516 second doses), only 23 (2%) vaccine-associated seizure exacerbations occurred, exclusively in patients with ongoing seizures. The only predictor of not developing vaccine-associated seizures post COVID vaccine was 12 months seizure freedom at time of first dose. To date, this is the largest study assessing COVID-19 vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation in PWE.

The risk of increased seizures after vaccination is small, compared to the previous studies from Germany, China and Kuwait that reported seizure exacerbation in 1.8 to 16% of patients.5-7 These differences may relate to differing sample sizes and study populations. The combined number of patients from these studies is 338 patients compared to our cohort of 530 patients, and we also examined seizure exacerbations after second vaccination.5-7 Specific groups of PWE may differ in their vulnerability, for example, a study of 120 patients with Dravet Syndrome found 13% of patients had a self-reported vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation.8

This study demonstrates a small risk of seizure exacerbation due to the COVID-19 vaccinations, in contrast to the much higher risks associated with COVID-19 infection itself.9 PWE are more likely to develop severe complications from COVID-19, including the requirement for mechanical ventilation and ICU admission, and death.9-10 Whilst COVID-19 may not worsen seizures in PWE directly, seizures can be triggered by fevers or other systemic factors, as with other infections.11 Furthermore, COVID-19 may be associated with hypoxia, stroke, systemic inflammatory response syndrome and encephalitis, all capable of precipitating acute symptomatic seizures in already vulnerable patients.8 Therefore the risk of neurological and systemic complications of COVID infections far outweighs the low risk of vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation.

Our study has limitations. First, most patients had relatively refractory epilepsy, typical of a tertiary hospital epilepsy clinic. The risk of vaccine-associated seizure exacerbations in the general population of PWE may be
lower than in our patients. Since most of our patients were not seizure free and required polytherapy with ≥2 ASMs, our data is relevant to drug resistant PWE. Only a small number of our patients had not received a COVID vaccine at the time of the survey and therefore a comparison to assess spontaneous fluctuations in seizure frequency was not possible. We were only able to compare seizure exacerbation post vaccination with each patient’s historical baseline seizure frequencies prior to their vaccination. Nonetheless, if anything, our results, which demonstrates a low risk of seizure COVID-19 vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation risk and highlights vaccine safety in this population, may be an *over-estimation* of seizure exacerbation risk, providing further reassurance for patients and clinicians when counselling about vaccine safety. The most common reason for lack of vaccination were concerns about vaccine safety and exclusion of these patients may have introduced an element of selection bias. Data regarding previous seizure exacerbations associated with other vaccinations (e.g. influenza vaccination) was not obtained. This may have influenced patients’ decisions to receive the COVID vaccine and information on this may have helped delineate whether the exacerbations were COVID vaccine-specific or a complication of vaccinations in PWE as a whole. In addition, the majority (75%) of our patients received the Pfizer Comirnaty vaccination, limiting generalisability of our findings to other COVID-19 vaccines. As with other studies, we have relied on patient self-reported seizure increases which may be vulnerable to recall bias. Pre-emptive escalation of ASM prior to the first COVID-19 vaccine dose was not explored, nor the potential protective role of this measure subsequently.

**Conclusions**

In summary our findings indicate very low likelihood of COVID-19 vaccine-related seizure exacerbations in PWE, usually occurring in patients with ongoing seizures, and major sequelae are very uncommon. This data can be utilised in counselling PWE regarding the safety of COVID-19 vaccination.
Reference


Table 1: Demographics of patients with and without seizure exacerbation after first COVID vaccination

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No seizure exacerbation</th>
<th>Seizure exacerbation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=517</td>
<td></td>
<td>N=13</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sex: female n (%)</th>
<th>Median age at time of first dose, yrs (range)</th>
<th>Epilepsy type n (%)</th>
<th>Symptomatic generalised epilepsy n (%)</th>
<th>12 months seizure free at time of first dose</th>
<th>Seizure frequency at time of first dose</th>
<th>Median no. of ASM at time of first dose</th>
<th>2 or more ASM at time of first dose n (%)</th>
<th>3 or more ASM at time of first dose n (%)</th>
<th>Brand of first dose</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>267 (52)</td>
<td>38 (16-84)</td>
<td>377 (73)</td>
<td>141 (27)</td>
<td>177 (33)</td>
<td>52 (10)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>372 (72)</td>
<td>225 (44)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 (69)</td>
<td>37 (17-62)</td>
<td>9 (69)</td>
<td>4 (31)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4 (31)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11 (85)</td>
<td>8 (61)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>135 (26)</td>
<td>161 (31)</td>
<td>161 (31)</td>
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<td>17 (3)</td>
<td>Astra Zeneca</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>131 (25)</td>
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<td>5 (1)</td>
<td>Moderna</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sex: female n (%): female n out of total sample.

Median age at time of first dose, yrs (range): Median age at first dose, range of ages.

Epilepsy type n (%): Percentage of patients with each type of epilepsy.

Symptomatic generalised epilepsy n (%): Percentage of patients with symptomatic generalised epilepsy.

12 months seizure free at time of first dose: Percentage of patients seizure free for 12 months.

Seizure frequency at time of first dose: Frequency of seizures at first dose.

Median no. of ASM at time of first dose: Median number of antiseizure medications at first dose.

2 or more ASM at time of first dose n (%): Percentage of patients with 2 or more ASM at first dose.

3 or more ASM at time of first dose n (%): Percentage of patients with 3 or more ASM at first dose.

Brand of first dose: Brand of the first dose administered.

P-value: Statistical significance of the differences.
Table 2: Vaccine-associated seizure exacerbation after 1st and 2nd vaccine doses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Seizure exacerbation after 1st vaccination</th>
<th>Seizure exacerbation after 2nd vaccination</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of patients</td>
<td>13 patients</td>
<td>10 patients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median time from vaccine to seizure (range)</td>
<td>1 day (0-3)</td>
<td>1 day (0-7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seizure on day of vaccine n (%)</td>
<td>4 (31)</td>
<td>5 (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other vaccine side effects n (%)</td>
<td>5 (38)</td>
<td>4 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seizure cluster n (%)</td>
<td>6 (46)</td>
<td>4 (40)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status epilepticus n (%)</td>
<td>1(8)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exacerbation with 2nd vaccination n (%)</td>
<td>6 (46)</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTERESTS FOR Epilepsy and Behaviour (Short Communication)

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Dr Dunne reports no disclosures