

TIPS

FOR LIVING WITH ATAXIA

People with ataxia lose muscle control in their legs and arms, which can lead to a lack of coordination and balance, as well as gait disturbance. Ataxia can be acute, subacute, or chronic and may result from abnormalities in the central nervous system or the peripheral nervous system. The following tips can help if you have ataxia.

Find the underlying cause. Ataxia can result from many causes, such as stroke, multiple sclerosis, tumors, nerve damage, alcoholism, metabolic disorders, and vitamin deficiencies. In these cases, treating the underlying condition that caused ataxia may improve it.

Ready yourself for your neurologist. Select the top three most severe ataxia symptoms that you want to discuss during an appointment with your neurologist. Your neurologist may ask specific questions about your symptoms. Stay focused and listen closely and carefully so that you can answer his or her questions accurately.

Consider occupational therapy. Occupational therapy can teach you how to adapt to your gradual loss of mobility and help you develop new skills to perform daily activities. An occupational therapist may be able to teach you how to use a wheelchair or other mobility devices. He or she may advise you about modifications you can make to your house, such as installing guide rails or a stairlift.

Monitor your bladder. Urinary urgency or urinary incontinence can sometimes affect people with ataxia. In some cases, bladder problems can be controlled using techniques such as limiting fluid intake during the day, planning regular trips to the toilet, and avoiding chemicals known to stimulate urine production, such as alcohol and caffeine.



Walk with assistance. Try using a four-wheeled rollator for walking. Some people find it helpful to weigh down the frame of their rollator. To do this, put bags of sugar in the basket of your rollator until the weight feels right for you. Once you determine the correct weight, replace the bags of sugar with weights purchased from a sports shop.

Correct your vision problems. Eye problems can occur along with ataxia. For example, some people with ataxia experience double vision. It may be possible to treat this symptom by attaching a prism to your glasses.

Keep active and exercise. Being active and exercising will keep your muscles strong. Strong core muscles can help to minimize the effects of ataxia on walking and transferring. Activities such as yoga, Pilates, or tai chi also may be helpful because they keep the coordination and balance systems of the body functioning.

Avoid consuming simple carbohydrates. People with ataxia can crave high amounts of sugar to ward off fatigue and depression. Consuming simple carbohydrates (eg, high-fructose corn syrup or artificial sweetener), however, can cause more fatigue and depression than it relieves. Protein, fat, fruits, and vegetables are better choices.

This page is part of an ongoing series of practical tips for patients with neurologic disorders. If you have compiled clinically relevant tips that you wish to share, please contact the editor at info@neurologyreviews.com.

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