

Cerebellar ataxia leads to a lack of muscle movement coordination caused by a dysfunction in a part of the brain called the cerebellum, which controls the timing and force of muscle movement. People with cerebellar ataxia have trouble balancing, walk in an uncoordinated and unsteady way, and find it difficult to carry out fine movements with the hands and arms. It can be caused by conditions that lead to brain damage, specific drugs, or genetic cerebellar disorders.

What do the symptoms of cerebellar ataxia feel like?

Cerebellar ataxia can affect balance, walking, speech, vision and the ability to judge distances. Initially, people with cerebellar ataxia may find it hard to balance but as the condition progresses, walking becomes an unsteady or staggering movement, and a wide stance is adopted to help with this. Speech can become slurred and people with cerebellar ataxia can lose the ability to judge distances and control fine muscle movements so that it is difficult to pick up small items or touch a specific letter on a computer keyboard, for example. If control of eye movement is affected, it can become hard to balance and read.

What causes cerebellar ataxia?

Cerebellar ataxia is caused by damage to the cerebellum, the part of the brain that controls movement, which can result from a head injury, stroke, brain tumour or multiple sclerosis. Drugs that suppress the central nervous system, such as anti-epileptic drugs and lithium can also cause cerebellar ataxia. Some types of cerebellar ataxia can be genetic, but for some people no specific cause can be found.

How is a diagnosis made?

If referred to a specialist by your GP, diagnosis of your condition will be made based on your medical history, answers to questions about your symptoms, a physical examination and the results of a number of tests. These tests may include a blood test and a brain scan.



How is cerebellar ataxia treated?

The treatment of cerebellar ataxia depends on the underlying cause and can include medications, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech pathology. Physiotherapy treatment aims to provide exercises that improve co-ordination and movement control of the limbs and trunk, as well as improving balance and gait. It also includes learning strategies for safe mobility and, for some people, the prescription of an appropriate gait aid to reduce the risk of falls.

Referral to an occupational therapist can be made to help patients adjust the home environment to maximise safety and ease of movement, and also to learn new ways to carry out daily activities. Speech pathology is necessary if symptoms include difficulty with speech and swallowing.

Living with cerebellar ataxia

Living with cerebellar ataxia may involve working with specialist physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech pathologists to ease symptoms, and maintain as much function and independence as possible. This may include using mobility aids, changing the home environment and making lifestyle adjustments (such as alcohol avoidance) to make daily activities easier.

Patient support

SCA Australia is a support group that aims to assist people with ataxia through meetings, events and information. Visit www.scars.org.au.

The National Ataxia Foundation is a US-based, non-profit organisation. Their website contains useful information about ataxia. Visit www.ataxia.org.

More information

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