

Alcohol related ataxia



Information for patients

Neurology



What is ataxia?

Ataxia means lack of co-ordination, and is the result of damage to a part of the brain called the cerebellum which is responsible for refining movement. People with ataxia have problems with coordination and balance. Often people first notice a problem when they realise they have been falling over or struggling to walk in a straight line or they may notice that they have become clumsy.

Ataxia affects people in different ways. Some people are affected very mildly, for example they only experience slight balance problems when walking. Others experience more severe symptoms requiring assistance to carry out every day living tasks.



Normal cerebellum on MRI scan



MRI showing cerebellar atrophy

What causes ataxia?

Some people have inherited ataxia due to faulty genes which come from one or both parents. Others can develop ataxia as a result of damage to the balance centre due to a stroke, tumour, vitamin deficiencies, etc.

Some individuals can develop ataxia due to exposure to alcohol over long periods of time.

In many people, discovering the cause of ataxia is complicated and involves having a number of investigations.

Sometimes it is not possible to find the cause of ataxia.

Alcohol related ataxia

Damage from alcohol is a common cause of cerebellar ataxia. In patients with alcohol related ataxia, the symptoms affect gait (walking) and lower limbs more than arms and speech. It can also cause associated signs of peripheral neuropathy.

Peripheral neuropathy is damage to the body's peripheral nervous system. This can cause muscle weakness, numbness and tingling, burning pain and a loss of coordination. This peripheral neuropathy, can contribute to the ataxia.

Inside the brain, alcohol directly damages certain cells within the cerebellum and the rest of the brain, and for those people who drink excessively over a long period of time it can cause particularly severe and often permanent damage.

Alcohol ataxia and other factors

Patients who drink excessively are often prone to nutritional deficiencies (e.g. thiamine, vitamin E) due to poor diet or damage to the gut lining, preventing the absorption of vitamins. At the Ataxia Centre we usually check levels of various vitamins and will advise if they need replacing.

How will I know that my drinking is causing my ataxia?

Some individuals seem to be more susceptible than others to the toxic effects of alcohol so there is no precise definition of how much alcohol is required or how long someone needs to drink excessively before damage occurs.

The Department of Health issues recommendations for safe alcohol limits which are:

- **Men 14 units weekly with 2 alcohol free days**
- **Women 14 units weekly with 2 alcohol free days**

You may be able to estimate how many units you are drinking using the pictures below.



You can find further details of how many units are in each measure of alcohol and calculate your own weekly units by accessing the alcohol calculator on the NHS Choices website:

- www.nhs.uk/Tools/Pages/Alcoholcalculator

Once damage has occurred, ataxia symptoms continue to progress if you continue to drink excessive amounts of alcohol.

How can I stop my ataxia from getting worse?

The only way to prevent your ataxia symptoms from getting worse is to stop drinking alcohol. For most people, cutting down to below the recommended units can help, for others it may be necessary to stop altogether. Because alcohol is an addictive substance for some people who drink excessively just drinking small amounts may not be possible. If this is the case it is better not to drink alcohol at all.

It is important NOT to suddenly stop drinking alcohol as this can cause unpleasant side effects. Please speak to your local Alcohol Advice Services, the Ataxia Centre staff or your GP about how to do this.

What should I do now?

If it is thought that alcohol is the cause of your ataxia symptoms this will be explained to you.

The first step to treatment is to reduce or stop drinking alcohol.

Ataxia can stabilise or even improve with stopping alcohol, but worsen in those who continue to drink.

We know that for some people stopping drinking and asking for help can be very difficult and we are here to try and help.

If you attend the Sheffield Ataxia Clinic you can contact the Ataxia Nurse on **0114 271 3946** and she will help you to decide what to do next.

Alternatively, you can contact your GP who will be able to give you advice about local services and what they can offer.

Where can I find further information and support?

If you want to give someone a call you may find Drinkline useful:

- **0300 123 1110**

Drinkline is a confidential helpline for those concerned about their own drinking or that of someone else. They can direct you to local support services.

For other useful advice and support see Drinkaware:

- **www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-support-services**



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