

What is Acquired Ataxia?

“Ataxia” means loss of coordination or balance. It is not a disease by itself but a symptom caused by damage to the parts of the brain that control movement – especially the cerebellum. “Acquired” means it develops after birth, due to another illness, injury, or exposure. **Please see the leaflet on “What are the causes of acquired ataxia” for more details.**

Common Causes

Acquired ataxia has many possible causes. Some of them can be treated or reversed if found early:

- Vitamin deficiencies: Lack of vitamin B1, B12, or vitamin E
- Metabolic problems: Low thyroid (hypothyroidism), low sodium (hyponatremia)
- Infections: Tuberculosis (TB), HIV, after chickenpox (post-varicella), or other brain infections
- Autoimmune/demyelinating conditions: Gluten ataxia, multiple sclerosis, MOG or AQP4 antibody disease, autoimmune cerebellitis
- Paraneoplastic causes: When the immune system reacts to a hidden cancer elsewhere in the body
- Stroke or brain injury
- Toxins and drugs: Alcohol, carbon monoxide (CO), glue sniffing, or certain seizure medications (e.g., phenytoin) and chemotherapy drugs
- Tumors or heavy metal (like mercury, lead) exposure

Specific Treatments

Vitamin, Metabolic, Endocrinal Causes

- Vitamin deficiencies: Replace missing vitamins (B1, B12, or E) through tablets or injections.
- Hypothyroidism: Thyroid hormone tablets restore normal levels.
- Hepatic or renal failure: May produce metabolic encephalopathy with ataxia, which require treatment of the underlying cause.

Gluten and Autoimmune, Demyelinating Ataxia

- Gluten ataxia: A strict gluten-free diet may stop progression.
- Autoimmune/demyelinating causes: Treated with steroids, IV immunoglobulin (IVIg), or other immune therapies.

Infection-Related Ataxia

- TB, HIV, or post-chickenpox ataxia: Managed with specific anti-infective treatment and supportive care.

Toxin or Drug-Related Ataxia

- Stop the toxic exposure (alcohol, CO, glue, or certain drugs).

Paraneoplastic and Tumor Causes

- Search for underlying cancer with scans and blood tests.
- Treating the cancer and using immune therapies may help the ataxia.

Other Causes (Stroke, Trauma, Structural abnormalities)

- Managed with stroke care, surgery (for craniovertebral junction anomalies), or rehabilitation as needed.