

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT...

Medications for Ataxia Symptoms

DISCLAIMER: *This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care. All of these medications may have serious side effects and should only be used under a doctor's supervision. NAF makes no representation or promise regarding the effectiveness of any drug listed below.*

At this time, the goals of treatment of ataxia are to improve the quality of life for the person with ataxia. For certain types of ataxia, such as ataxia due to Vitamin E deficiency, specific treatment of the underlying problem may improve the ataxia itself. But for most kinds of ataxia, a treatment or cure for the disease is not yet available, so the focus is on identifying symptoms related to or caused by the ataxia, and treating those symptoms.

Through education, timely involvement of other specialists, rehabilitation interventions (physical and occupation therapy, speech and swallowing therapy), and medical treatment of specific symptoms, the quality of life of any person with ataxia can be improved considerably.

Listed below are some of the common symptoms associated with ataxia followed by off-label medications that have been used for those symptoms and have been reported in the medical literature and ataxia clinicians. If available as a generic, that name is listed first with the name brand in parentheses.

Sensitivity to Medication: Ataxia patients are going to be like any other patient with a central nervous system disease--much more sensitive to medications, as are older people. These patients frequently require lower doses of medications.

Depression: SSRI's (Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), SNRI's (Selective norepinephrine-serotonin reuptake inhibitors)--classes of drugs for anxiety or depression

Dizziness/Vertigo: Acetazolamide (Diamox), 4-aminopyridine, Baclofen, Clonazepam, Flunarizine, Gabapentin (Neurontin), Meclizine, Memantine, Ondansetron (Zofran), Scopolamine (eg. Transderm Scop Patch for motion sickness)

Excessive daytime sleepiness: Modafinil (Provigil) or Armodafinil (Nuvigil)

Erectile Dysfunction: Cialis, Levitra, Viagra

Fatigue: Amantadine, Atomoxetine (Strattera), Bupropion (Wellbutrin), Carnitine, Creatine, Modafinil (Provigil) or Armodafinil (Nuvigil), Pyridostigmine, Selegiline (Eldepryl), Venlafaxine (Effexor), Desvenlafaxine (Pristiq); SSRI's (Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors), SNRI's (Selective norepinephrine-serotonin reuptake inhibitors)--classes of drugs for anxiety or depression that may also help fatigue.

Imbalance/Incoordination: Amantadine, Buspirone (Buspar), Riluzole (Rilutek), Varenicline (Chantix). (Pilot Study of Varenicline (Chantix®) in the Treatment of Friedreich's ataxia was terminated as a result of concerns regarding safety and intolerability).

Memory or thinking disorders: Cholinesterase inhibitors (memory drugs approved for use in Alzheimer's disease), Memantine (Namenda)

Muscle cramps or spasms: Baclofen, Tizanidine (Zanaflex)

Muscle strength: Creatine

Myofascial pain: Cymbalta, Lyrica, Gabapentin

Neuropathy: Cymbalta, Lyrica; as well as common usage of gabapentin, other anti-seizure drugs, and various tricyclic anti-depressants.

Nystagmus: Acetazolamide (Diamox), 4-aminopyridine, Baclofen, Carbamazepine, Clonazepam (Klonopin), Gabapentin (Neurontin), Isoniazid, Memantine

Orthostatic hypotension: Atomoxetine (Strattera), Droxidopa (Northera), Ephedrine, Fludrocortisone (Florinef), Midodrine, Pyridostigmine

Overactive Bladder: There are many anticholinergic drugs approved for overactive bladder, which can help in cases of neurogenic bladder. Botulinum toxin Shots have also been used in severe cases unresponsive to oral medication or rehabilitation/biofeedback strategies.

Restless legs: Gabapentin (Neurontin or Horizant), Levodopa (carbidopa-levodopa, Sinemet), Pramipexole (Mirapex), Ropinirole (Requip)

Rigidity: Pramipexole (Mirapex), Ropinirole (Requip)

Sleep Disorders/Parasomnias (vivid dreams, nightmares, acting out dreams, sleepwalking): Clonazepam. **Sleep apnea symptoms** must be evaluated with a sleep study (nocturnal polysomnogram) and treated with positive pressure airway support if indicated.

Speech and Swallowing: pseudobulbar dysfunction-- Fluoxetine (Prozac), NAC (N-acetylcysteine)

Stiffness/Spasticity/Rigidity/Dystonia: Amantadine, Baclofen, Botulinum toxin Shots, Dantrolene sodium (Dantrium), Diazepam (Valium)- (But high doses can worsen ataxia), Levodopa (carbidopa-levodopa, Sinemet), Pramipexole (Mirapex), Ropinirole (Requip), Tizanidine (Zanaflex), Trihexyphenidyl

Tremor or Rest Tremor: Amantadine, Botulinum toxin Shots, Carbamazepine, Clonazepam, Deep Brain Stimulation, Flunarizine, Gabapentin (Neurontin), Isoniazid, Levetiracetam, Levodopa (carbidopa-levodopa, Sinemet), NAC (N-acetylcysteine), Ondansetron (Zofran), Pramipexole (Mirapex), Primidone, Propranolol, Ropinirole (Requip), Topiramate, Valproic Acid (Depakote)

Uncontrolled Laughing and Crying: Fluoxetine (Prozac), Neudexta, Amitriptyline

Episodic Ataxia type 1: Carbamazepine, Phenytoin

Episodic Ataxia type 2: Flunarizine, Acetazolamide, and 4 aminopyridine

DISCLAIMER: This fact sheet is designed for educational purposes only and is not intended to serve as medical advice. The information provided here should not be used for diagnosing or treating a health problem or disease. It is not a substitute for professional care. All of these medications may have serious side effects and should only be used under a doctor's supervision. NAF makes no representation or promise regarding the effectiveness of any drug listed above.

July 2015