

Multiple System Atrophy Cerebellar Type (MSA-C)

What is MSA-C?

Multiple System Atrophy is a rare neurodegenerative disorder. Approximately 3 in 100,000 people will develop MSA, but the frequency and subtype of MSA varies considerably based on geographical location and ethnic background.

Multiple System Atrophy Cerebellar type (MSA-C), which has ataxia symptoms, is more common for people with Japanese, Korean, or Latin American ancestry. Multiple System Atrophy Parkinson type (MSA-P), which has similar symptoms to Parkinson's disease, is more common for people with European ancestry. MSA-C tends to be less common than MSA-P.

What are the symptoms of MSA-C?

MSA-C impacts multiple body systems. This means that the first systems that someone experiences can vary a lot from person to person. Ataxia symptoms may include difficulty with balance, poor coordination, slurred speech, jerky eye movement, and challenges with hand movements.

Autonomic symptoms may include irregular heart rate, inconsistent blood pressure, lack of sweating, problems with digestion, loss of bowel control, and sexual dysfunction. It is common for MSA-C patients to have neurogenic orthostatic hypotension, where they become dizzy or faint when they sit up or stand up. This symptom is related to having inconsistent blood pressure. Many MSA-C patients also have some form of cognitive impairment and particularly struggle with planning or carrying out goals.

What is the prognosis for MSA-C?

Due to the rarity of MSA-C and the limited research available, it can be hard to predict how the disease will progress. The onset of symptoms for MSA-C usually occurs in mid-adulthood, with the average age of diagnoses between 55-60 years old. Most MSA-C patients have a life expectancy of 6-10 years after they begin to experience symptoms.

Although there is no preventative or curative treatment for MSA-C, there are treatments available to help manage symptoms. For example, there are medications to reduce dizziness or fainting, as well as sleep apnea devices that can help with breathing difficulties. Physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech therapy can also be beneficial.

How is MSA-C diagnosed?

MSA-C is a sporadic disease, meaning that it happens infrequently in the population without known genetic or environmental causes. Research is being done to better understand why MSA-C occurs. For now though, there is no specific test for MSA-C or MSA-P. Instead, doctors will use a combination of clinical observations, autonomic function testing, and neuroimaging.

For autonomic testing can include measuring changes in your heart rate while completing different movements, measuring the activity of nerves that control sweating, or measuring how much you are sweating. For neuroimaging, doctors will often order an MRI to measure the size of the pons and cerebellum. In MSA-C, these areas of the brain will be smaller. Based on the results of these tests, doctors can determine if someone meets the criteria for an MSA-C diagnosis.

What kind of support is available after the diagnosis?

The National Ataxia Foundation (NAF) is committed to providing information and education about Ataxia, support groups for those affected by Ataxia, and promoting and funding research to find the cause for the various forms of Ataxia, better treatments, and, hopefully someday, a cure. NAF has been at the forefront funding promising worldwide research to find answers.

As Ataxia research moves into the clinical phase, pharmaceutical companies will begin recruiting participants for clinical trials. Individuals with Ataxia or who are at-risk for Ataxia are encouraged to enroll in the CoRDS Ataxia Patient Registry. To access the Registry, go to NAF's website www.ataxia.org and click on the "Enroll in the Patient Registry" tab and follow the directions on the CoRDS website.

NAF provides accurate information for you, your family, and your physician about Ataxia. Please visit the NAF website at www.ataxia.org for additional information, including a listing of ataxia support groups, physicians who treat Ataxia, social networks, and more. For questions contact the NAF directly at (763) 553-0020 or naf@ataxia.org.