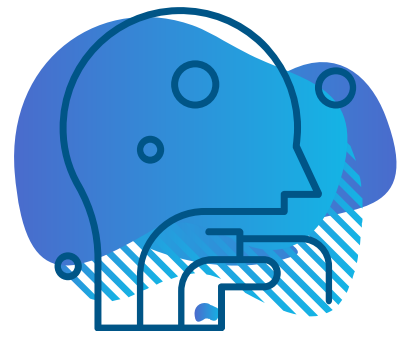


Managing Speech & Swallowing Impairments in Ataxia



How Ataxia Affects Speech & Swallowing

Ataxia impacts the cerebellum, which coordinates movement. This can cause:

Speech Changes

- **Breath & Voice:** Running out of air mid-sentence, difficulty controlling pitch and volume, voice sounding breathy or hoarse
- **Resonance:** Voice may sound unusually nasal or “stuffy”
- **Articulation:** Sounds may be distorted, syllables may drop (e.g., “telescope” → “tel’scope”), speech may feel slurred
- **Rate & Rhythm:** Speech can become slow, uneven, or choppy

Swallowing Changes

- Coughing while eating and drinking
- Choking on foods, liquids, pills, or saliva
- Needing to concentrate so things don’t “go down the wrong pipe”
- Difficulty controlling food/drink in the mouth
- Trouble initiating a swallow
- Poor coordination of breathing and swallowing, increasing choking risk
- Food or pills sticking in the throat

Evaluation & Treatment

Speech-language pathologists (SLPs) are the primary providers who manage speech and swallowing difficulties. SLPs use:

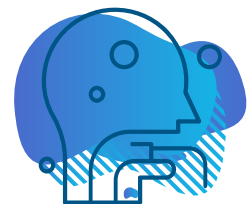
- **Assessment:**
 - Office evaluation
 - X-ray and endoscopic swallow studies
- **Treatment Approaches:**
 - **Rehabilitation:** Exercises to retrain muscles and improve coordination
 - **Compensation:** Strategies to mitigate symptoms such as posture changes, modifying food textures, or changing the environment
 - **Education & Caregiver Training:** To improve communication and meal safety

Note: Tell your doctor if you notice changes in your speech or swallowing. They may refer you to a specialty physician, such as a gastroenterologist or ENT, for further evaluation. They can also refer you to a speech-language pathologist (SLP).

Assistive Technology for Communication

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Devices (AAC) = tools to support or replace speech, from simple to high-tech

- **Low-tech:** Gestures, writing, picture boards.
- **High-tech:**
 - Apps on smartphones/tablets.
 - Speech-generating devices (often covered by insurance).
 - Eye-tracking or head-pointing controls for those with motor challenges.



Voice & Message Banking

- **Voice Banking:** Record hours of speech to create a synthetic version of your natural voice.
- **Message Banking:** Record meaningful phrases for playback later.
- **Tip:** Start early if interested.

Assistive Tools for Swallowing

- **Adaptive utensils & cups:** Designed to control sip size or improve grip.
- **Thickening agents:** Make liquids easier to control.
- **Safe Straw / Flow-Control Cups:** Limit liquid volume per sip.
- **Posture adjustments:** Only under SLP guidance—some positions can help, others can harm.
- **Sensory modifications:** Cold, sour, or fizzy drinks may improve swallow safety for some.

Daily Strategies

- Eat/drink in a quiet setting with minimal distractions.
- Take small bites and sips.
- Swallow twice if needed before the next bite.
- If you feel that dry or tough foods stick in your throat, consider adding extra moisture to them (e.g., sauces, gravies, condiments).
- If it is hard to swallow pills with liquids, try taking them with yogurt or applesauce.
- Keep a journal of symptoms—helpful for tracking changes and guiding care.
- See an SLP promptly if you notice changes.

Key Takeaways

- Ataxia can cause gradual changes in speech and swallowing—early intervention helps.
- A combination of therapy, assistive technology, and adaptive tools can maintain communication and safety.
- Work closely with healthcare providers for personalized recommendations.

Resources

Ask your SLP for funding options, device training, and support organizations such as the National Ataxia Foundation.

- Find a Speech Language Pathologist (SLP)
 - [Ataxia Centers](#)
 - [American Speech-Language-Hearing Association \(ASHA\)](#)
- [Assistive Technology & Strategies to Mitigate Speech & Swallowing Impairments in Ataxia – 2025 Annual Ataxia Conference Lecture](#)
- [FA & Speech Toolkit](#)

Collaborators:

Allison Hilger, PhD, CCC-SLP

Assistant Professor University of Colorado Boulder
Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences
Director of the CO Motor Speech Lab
www.colorado.edu/lab/motor-speech/

Caitlin Cloud, M.A., CCC-SLP

Speech-Language Pathologist & PhD Student
University of Nebraska-Lincoln