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- Catatonia is a serious condition that affects a person’s mood, speech, and movement.
- Catatonia may be caused by a mental health disorder or medical condition.
- Benzodiazepines such as lorazepam are used to treat catatonia.
- Once catatonia is treated, the benzodiazepine will slowly be decreased to avoid withdrawal and the return of catatonia symptoms.
- If someone is experiencing catatonia, they should be taken to the emergency department as soon as possible.

What is catatonia?

Catatonia is a condition that may affect a person’s mood, speech, and movement. If a person has catatonia, they may have these symptoms:¹

- Staring
- Very little physical movement or verbal communication
- Not responding verbally or physically to what is happening around them
- Stiff posture
- Odd or repetitive movements without a clear purpose
- Agitation
- Frowning
- Copying other people’s speech or movement
- Holding their body in uncomfortable positions

Since there are no lab tests that can be done to check if someone has catatonia, health care providers will review a person for the symptoms listed above. A commonly used scale to see if someone has catatonia is the Bush-Francis Catatonia Rating Scale.² The higher a person scores on this scale, the greater the severity of catatonia.

What causes catatonia?

Several things may cause catatonia including a mental health disorder or medical condition. Catatonia may also occur for no clear reason.¹

Mental health disorders that may cause catatonia: ^{1,3}	Medical conditions that may cause catatonia: ^{1,3}
Bipolar disorder	Head injury
Depression	Stroke
Schizophrenia	Autoimmune disorders
Autism spectrum disorder	Medication withdrawal

What are complications of catatonia?

Catatonia is estimated to occur in one in ten thousand persons per year.⁴ Despite being uncommon, if untreated, catatonia can cause infections, blood clots, kidney injuries, dehydration, and, in severe cases, death.^{3,5} For this reason, recognizing and treating catatonia is important.

How is catatonia treated?

Benzodiazepines is the main class of medications used to treat catatonia.³ Lorazepam is the most studied benzodiazepine in catatonia. If a health care provider thinks someone has catatonia, they will give the person lorazepam and see how they respond. This is known as a lorazepam challenge. The medication may be given by mouth or by injection. If symptoms of catatonia decrease by 50%, the person is considered to have responded to lorazepam and to have catatonia.⁶ For example, if someone has catatonia, taking lorazepam would make them more awake and able to respond.⁷ However, in someone without catatonia, taking lorazepam would make them feel tired.⁷

If a person responds to the lorazepam challenge, the lorazepam dose should be increased until catatonia symptoms are gone, the person is sleepy, or the dose has reached 16 mg per day.³ Typically, lorazepam will be scheduled to be given three times per day. Some people might respond after a few doses or lower doses of lorazepam, while other people may require longer treatment or higher doses.³

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is another treatment option for catatonia that may be considered if lorazepam does not work.^{3,8} ECT is a medical procedure where small electrical currents pass through the brain. Medications are given before ECT to make sure the person is comfortable and a team of health care professionals are present to watch over the person. While ECT sounds scary, it is relatively safe and effective.⁹ The number of ECT sessions needed for catatonia varies from person to person.^{3,8}

Since catatonia can be caused by several other conditions or disorders, treating what's causing the catatonia in the first place is also important.

How are benzodiazepines stopped?

Benzodiazepines are continued until the person no longer has catatonia symptoms for an extended period of time. After catatonia is treated, benzodiazepines such as lorazepam should not be suddenly stopped. Instead, the dose should be carefully decreased to prevent withdrawal symptoms and the return of catatonia symptoms.⁶ Symptoms of benzodiazepine withdrawal include anxiety, trouble sleeping, restlessness, agitation, poor memory, and/or muscle pain. The total time it takes to stop the benzodiazepine will depend on how long it was used, the dose and the person's risk of withdrawal.

Are there other treatment options?

While benzodiazepines are the most studied medication for catatonia, there are other options that might help treat catatonia. These options may be considered if benzodiazepines or ECT do not work or cannot be used. Other options include:⁶

- Zolpidem
- Amantadine and memantine
- Dopamine agonists
- Antipsychotics
- Anticonvulsants

Resources

- NAMI – My Experience with a Catatonic-like State: <https://www.nami.org/trauma-and-stressor-related-disorders/my-experience-with-a-catatonic-like-state/>
- The Catatonia Foundation: <https://www.thecatatoniacatoniafoundation.org/questions-about-catatonia>



Go online to find more information and to view the references for this toolkit.

aapp.org/617600