Treatment Options for Catatonia

For Families and Caregivers

The main goal of treating catatonia is to increase a brain chemical called GABA, which helps the brain work properly. This resource gives general information about treatment options for catatonia. It is not medical advice.



Medication



The most common medicines used to treat catatonia are called benzodiazepines. These medications are usually safe and work well for many people. About 60% to 90% of people with catatonia improve when treated with these medications.

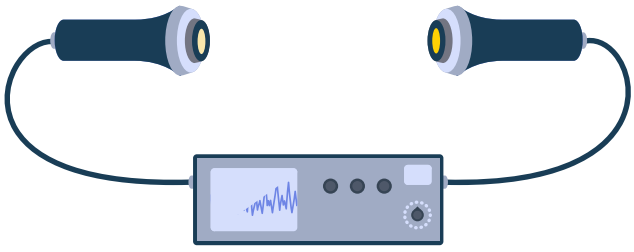
If a doctor thinks someone may have catatonia but is not sure, they may use a benzodiazepine challenge. This means giving the medication for a short time to see if symptoms improve. If there is improvement, it suggests that catatonia is present and that the medication is likely to help.

The doctor may need to adjust the dose to find what works best. This usually requires very high doses of these medications. If symptoms do not improve enough with medication, other treatments may be considered.

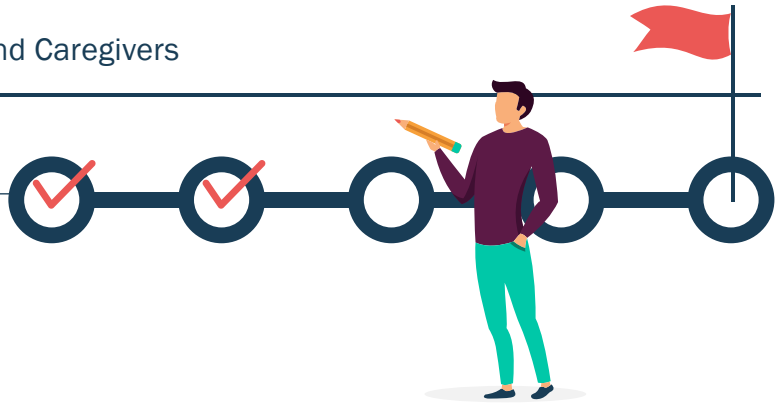
Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

If medication does not help enough, ECT may be recommended. ECT is a safe and effective treatment that is done in a hospital or other medical setting.

During ECT, the person is asleep under anesthesia. A small, carefully controlled electrical current is sent to the brain. This causes a brief seizure that can help reset the way the brain's chemicals and signals work.



ECT is usually given in a series of treatments. Most people receive treatment two to three times a week for several weeks. As symptoms improve, treatments may be spaced farther apart. Some people continue with maintenance treatments about once a month to prevent symptoms from returning.



Behavioral Supports

Behavioral supports should be used along with medical treatments. Catatonia is a medical condition, not a behavior problem. Even though some symptoms may look like challenging behavior, they are caused by changes in the brain. Helpful supports may include:

- **Reducing demands and stress.** Anxiety, sensory overload, and major life changes can make symptoms worse. A calm and supportive environment can help.
- **Using predictable routines and visual schedules.** Knowing what to expect can reduce stress and increase comfort.
- **Giving simple, gentle prompts.** Some people can complete a task if they are given extra time and a calm reminder. Repeating instructions or increasing pressure may increase distress.
- **Allow extra processing time.** Wait longer for responses and avoid asking many questions quickly.
- **Making sensory accommodations.** Reduce noise, bright lights, and other distractions. Quiet spaces and breaks can be helpful.
- **Using familiar people, activities, and comfort items.** These can increase feelings of safety and support engagement.
- **Providing help with daily living tasks.** Support may be needed for eating, drinking, toileting, hygiene, and mobility. More severe cases may require hospital care.
- **Supporting communication.** If speaking becomes difficult, offer other ways to communicate, such as pictures, gestures, yes/no cards, or assistive/augmentative communication devices. Do not assume the person does not understand what is being said.

Importance of Prompt Treatment

Getting treatment quickly is important for two reasons.

- **Prevent serious medical problems:** Catatonia can lead to serious health complications, including blood clots, muscle tightening, dehydration, weight loss, and poor nutrition. In some cases, it can progress to malignant catatonia, a life-threatening condition that may cause fever, rapid heart rate, high blood pressure, and other serious medical problems
- **Better long–term outcomes:** Earlier treatment gives the best chance for recovery. Catatonia that lasts a long time can become harder to treat, and it may be more difficult for a person to regain skills that were lost during the illness.

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