Catatonia

What is catatonia?

- Catatonia is a motor syndrome consisting of changes in movement, speech, and behaviors.
- The movement symptoms typically involve difficulty starting or stopping a movement.
- It can be due to a range of neuropsychiatric (e.g., autism spectrum disorder, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, depression, etc.) or medical illnesses (e.g., infection).
- There are three subtypes:
  - **Excited**: increased movement, speech, impulsivity, and abnormal repetitive behaviors,
  - **Withdrawn**: decreased movement, freezing, loss of speech, and decreased engagement/interaction,
  - **Mixed**: features of both excited and withdrawn catatonia.
- Increasingly recognized in patients with ASD, often beginning at the end of adolescence or early adulthood.

Who should be evaluated for catatonia?

- Any person who has at least 1 of the following symptoms:
  - Freezing in the middle of an action
  - Difficulty crossing thresholds (e.g., doorways)
  - Slowed movements or needing prompts to start or complete actions
  - Loss of verbal language
  - Loss of self-help skills (e.g., toileting, feeding)
  - New repetitive movements or difficulty stopping actions
  - New repetitive vocalizations or speech
  - Decreased interest in the environment
  - Odd, stiff postures or gait.

How is catatonia diagnosed?

- There is no laboratory test that can make the diagnosis; however, it may be necessary to complete a workup to determine if there is a medical illness causing catatonia.
- It is diagnosed based on clinical history, observation, and physical examination.
- A physical exam for catatonia includes checking for the motor signs including muscle stiffness and echopraxia (imitating another person’s movements).

What is the treatment for catatonia?

- Discontinue medications that may be making the catatonia worse (e.g., risperidone, aripiprazole).
- First line: high dose lorazepam (Ativan).
- Second line: electroconvulsive therapy or possibly clozapine.
  

The information provided above is not intended to be a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your medical provider with any questions regarding a medical condition or treatment plan.