



SIMPLE EXERCISE FOR ATAXIANS

Jenny Bell

Jenny Bell, who is a clinical exercise physiologist, gave Æ an excellent and interesting talk on exercising with ataxia, demonstrating various exercises, some of which could even be done in a wheelchair. Everyone benefited as Jenny tried to help everyone do a variety of movements.

Clinical Exercise Physiologists are concerned with the role of exercise in the prevention and rehabilitation of disease; for example people who exercise regularly are less likely to develop heart disease and, for those who have had a heart attack exercise is a major contributor to preventing any further event. Although there has not been an enormous amount of research into the specific benefits of exercise for individuals with ataxia, it is well established that exercise will help patients to maintain and improve **mobility** (the range of movement of joints) their **muscle strength**, and motor skills such as **balance and co-ordination**. Individual patients will benefit from different exercises depending on personal circumstances and the extent of their disability.

Mobility: Jenny talked the group through the main joints and the movements that can be performed to improve range of movement.

- Shoulders can be shrugged up and down and rotated forwards and backwards. The backward movement is particularly important; try regularly to pull the shoulder blades together as this counteracts any tendency to becoming round shouldered.
- The spine can be kept mobile by gentle bends to each side e.g. sitting on a chair with hands hanging down by your side, then gently reach down to the floor on one side before

returning to an upright position. Repeat on the other side. Also, whilst sitting, turn the upper body and head to look behind (keeping both buttocks squarely on the chair). Return to face front again and repeat on the other side. Wiggling your hips around (remember hula hoops!) is also good for improving mobility.

- The hip joint will benefit from being moved in all directions. Walking really only involves taking the leg forward and so exercises that take the leg out to the side and behind are recommended. For instance, if you are able, hold onto a chair or worktop, put your weight onto one leg and tap the other leg out to the side and in several times. You can also tap the leg out to the front and back or swing the leg in a controlled way backwards and forward. If you can't do these movements standing up try lying on the bed, then lift your leg, moving it sideways and then back again. You can also lift alternate legs straight up from this position but to take the leg back you would have to roll over onto your tummy!
- Circling your feet clockwise and anti-clockwise and pointing your toes down and up again is an excellent way to improve ankle mobility.

Strength: Because ataxia imposes limits on activity levels, muscles (particularly leg muscles) will lose strength and so exercises to counteract this are vital.

- One of the best exercises to maintain the strength of your thigh muscles can be done seated. Sit well back in the chair so that your back is supported. Then (with your leg bent at the knee) lift one thigh just off the seat of the chair. Next, try to straighten the leg out and then bend it again. Repeat 4-8 times on one leg and then repeat with the other.
- To maintain the strength in your arms and chest that you need for everyday activities such as opening doors, try standing in front of a wall with your feet about 12-18 inches from the bottom. Put your hands (at about shoulder level) against the wall, lean forward and then push yourself away (rather like a standing 'press-up').

'Therma Bands' [a large elastic band] are often used by physiotherapists and physiologists because they are particularly good for adding resistance to strength exercises. They can be purchased from stores and sports shops but can be expensive. It is also advisable to have tuition in how to use them safely and effectively.

Balance and co-ordination:

Standing somewhere where you can hold on to something for support, try these two exercises. Even better, do the exercises when you are with someone who can offer support if needed.

- Lift one foot off the floor and try to keep your balance whilst standing on the other leg for up to 10 seconds.
- Stand with both feet together and move your arms separately (don't forget you need one free to hold on with if necessary) in all sorts of different directions e.g. in front, to the side, behind, across your body, even above your head.

Whatever the exercise, be it for mobility, strength or balance, all movements should be performed in a controlled way and it is important not to 'over-do' it and make yourself overtired. Even if you struggle with some of the exercises, keep trying as you are stimulating your brain to send messages to the parts you are trying to move and stimulating your muscles to receive those messages and to respond.