

Chicken pox (or *varicella*) is a highly infectious illness that affects nearly all children at some stage. Most commonly, children catch it between the ages of 2 and 8 years old. The illness usually clears up by itself and complications are rare.

Occasionally Ataxia UK is contacted by parents of children who have developed acute ataxia (unsteadiness and loss of coordination) following chicken pox. To provide more information about this complication, a search was conducted of all the scientific research published between 2002 and 2008 that described complications following chickenpox.

A number of viral infections that can cause acute cerebellar ataxia have been described, including chickenpox, mycoplasma, Epstein Barr virus and mumps. (Nussinovitch)³. Onset of ataxia may occur around 8-9 days after the onset of the illness.

Studies showed that the incidence of severe complications in children following chickenpox was less than 1 per 100,000 children and ataxia was the complication in less than a quarter of these cases. (25 out of 112 children in study = 0.18/100,000)¹. Complications occurred in children who were otherwise healthy and could be expected to recover.

The ataxia usually begins to improve within a few weeks but may persist for as long as 2 months². Hospital admission is not generally required and patients are expected to recover completely.

In summary, the available research says that in children acute cerebellar ataxia may follow chicken pox and other viral infections and whilst there is some variability in the time it takes, complete recovery does occur. There is no specific therapy indicated.

References

¹Cameron C et al. Arch Dis Child 2007; 92 (12): 1062-6

²Saab et al. Int J Clin Pract 2002; 56 (9): 720

³Nussinovitch et al Clin Pediatr (Phila). 2003 Sep;42(7):581-4

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