

PARKINSON'S DISEASE

This information sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

What is Parkinson's disease?

It is a progressive chronic condition where mainly the brain co-ordination of movements of the muscles in the different parts of the body are affected. Development of symptoms are gradual.

What causes Parkinson's disease?

The cause of Parkinson's disease is not fully understood – it could occur due to a number of factors. Slow destruction and death of dopamine-producing neurons in certain parts of the brain due to age could be a contributing factor to some of the symptoms experienced. Environmental factors are also considered as a contributor to the development of Parkinson's disease.

What are the signs and symptoms of Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is characterised by four major symptoms:

- shaking (tremor)
- slowness of movement (bradykinesia)
- rigidity of the limbs or trunk (stiffness and increased resistance to passive movement, i.e. movement due to external force, such as physical therapy)
- poor balance and postural instability.

What are the complications of these symptoms?

- Depression
- Cognitive problems
- Difficulty swallowing
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty passing urine or poor bladder control
- Constipation
- Changes in blood pressure readings
- Olfactory (sense of smell) dysfunction
- Fatigue
- Pain
- Sexual dysfunction

How is the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease made?

The patient will notice symptoms such as muscle rigidity or slow movement and seek medical advice. There is no test that can prove that you have Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease is sometimes confused with other conditions. Some conditions can have 'Parkinson's-like' features or symptoms, but may be caused by other conditions. For example, some drugs used to treat other conditions can cause side effects that resemble the symptoms of Parkinson's disease. Some rare brain disorders can also cause similar symptoms.

Therefore, it is normal practice for a general practitioner to refer patients with potential Parkinson's disease to a neurologist, who can refer the patient back to the general practitioner for management after the diagnosis has been made.

The neurologist will conduct a physical and neurological examination including a patient history. The neurologist will:

- look for signs and symptoms of Parkinson's disease
- identify if symptoms began on one side of the body and spread to the other side over time as is typical with Parkinson's disease
- rule out other diagnoses that have similar symptoms.

If at least two of the identified symptoms are present and other possible causes of Parkinson's disease are ruled out, a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease is made.

How is Parkinson's disease treated?

At present there is medication that helps to control the condition, but no cure. The treatment options that are available may help to control the symptoms and maintain quality of life. Several medication items for Parkinson's exist.

- Levodopa is the main prescription used, but may be used simultaneously with other medication for the treatment of Parkinson's disease. A combination of drugs are therefore frequently used.
- The medication may have side effects and this should be discussed with your prescribing doctor.
- If medicinal treatment fails and the patient is fairly young with severe symptoms, surgical treatment such as the implantation of a deep brain stimulator is sometimes used. The procedure is not always successful and the equipment that is used (prosthesis) may not be paid in full by some medical schemes.
- Physiotherapy, speech therapy and light exercise is recommended.

What lifestyle changes can be made to help control your symptoms?

- *Stay active:*
 - Exercise regularly or as often as you are able to.
 - You may walk more slowly than before, but a daily walk is good exercise and may help to loosen up stiff muscles.
 - Resist the temptation for others to do things for you just because it may be quicker.
- *Constipation is common in people with Parkinson's disease:*
 - Help to reduce the chance of this by having lots to drink.
 - Eat plenty of vegetables, fruit and high-fibre foods.
- *Make correct use of medication:*
 - Make sure you know exactly when to take your medication. The schedule and timing of your doses are important.
 - A pharmacist will be able to advise and help if you have difficulty in getting tablets out of blister packs, have difficulty in remembering when to take your medication or have any other queries in this regard.
 - Report any suspected side effects to your doctor.
 - Medication taken for other conditions can worsen your condition. These may be prescribed for such things as mental illness, sickness, vertigo and dizziness. Check with your doctor if you are unsure about any additional medication that you may be taking.
- *Find out if you are covered when driving:*
 - If you are a driver, you should advise your local authorities and insurance company if you have developed Parkinson's disease. Your insurance may become invalid if you do not.
 - Depending on the severity of symptoms, you may still be allowed to drive following a medical assessment.
- *Depression is common in people with Parkinson's disease:*
 - Depression can cause symptoms that may make it seem as if the condition is getting worse, such as lack of energy and becoming slower.
If your condition seems to worsen quite quickly over a period of a few weeks, depression may be the cause. Tell your doctor if you suspect this., because depression can be treated.

Other helpful tips

- It may be easier to get up from a high chair than from a low couch.
- Consider using Velcro® fasteners instead of buttons.
- Carry a walking stick when you are out. This may increase your confidence if unsteadiness is a problem.

References

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