

The family library

Understanding Parkinson's Disease



What is Parkinson's Disease?

Parkinson's disease is a condition in which certain nerve cells in the brain become damaged and die. These nerve cells normally produce a chemical called dopamine which is important in controlling movement. Parkinson's disease is a slowly progressive disease with symptoms developing gradually, usually over a fifteen to twenty year time frame. Approximately 1.5 million adults in the United States are thought to have Parkinson's disease. Males tend to be affected more often than females. The majority of people affected are usually over the age of 50, but Parkinson's disease can affect people even as young as 18-20 years of age.

What are the symptoms of Parkinson's disease?

The symptoms of Parkinson's may be different with each person and may develop in no set order. The severity of symptoms may also vary from individual to individual. There are four "cardinal signs" of Parkinson's disease that are generally seen. The cardinal signs include:

1. Nonintention tremor – a tremor (shaking) of the hand when the hand is resting; this usually starts in one hand with a back and forth rubbing of the thumb and index finger. With some individuals, the tremor may begin in the foot, one side of the body, or occasionally in the facial area rather than the hand. It is important to note that there are other conditions besides Parkinson's disease that may cause a tremor.
2. Bradykinesia - generalized slowness of movement.
3. Rigidity - stiffness of limbs.
4. Postural dysfunction - balance or coordination problems. The person may appear to be in a stooped position. When the person walks they may appear as if they are leaning forward and shuffling more than walking. This can increase the risk of the person falling.

Understanding Parkinson's Disease (cont.)



Additional symptoms may include

- Tiredness, no energy
- Drooling
- A lack of expression to their face
- Speaking in a monotone voice
- Swallowing difficulties
- Decreased sense of smell
- Reduced sensation of pain
- Constipation
- Urinary difficulties
- Altered sleep patterns
- Increase in sweat gland activity
- Dementia – usually in the later stages of the disease

Diagnosis and Treatment

Laboratory and diagnostic studies may support a potential diagnosis of Parkinson's disease; however, there is no test that clearly diagnoses Parkinson's disease from other neurologic disorders. Thus, tests are commonly performed to rule out disorders that cause symptoms that look like Parkinson's disease. In order for a physician to consider a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, two of the four cardinal symptoms must be present over a period of time. A physician (usually a neurologist) will make a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease based on:

- A detailed medical history and physical examination that includes a detailed history of current and past medications that can cause symptoms that are similar to Parkinson's disease.
- An exam that assesses the person's agility, muscle tone, gait, and balance.
- The person's response to Parkinson's disease medications.

The physician may order some laboratory tests and/or other diagnostic tests such as an EEG that could indicate changes consistent with Parkinson's disease.

Understanding Parkinson's Disease (cont.)



There is no cure for Parkinson's disease so treatment focuses on controlling the symptoms as much as possible. Treatment includes medications that may replenish or imitate the action of dopamine.

While surgery can be an effective treatment option for different symptoms of Parkinson's disease, only the symptoms that previously improved on medication have the potential to improve after the surgery. Surgical treatment is reserved for patients who have exhausted medical treatment of Parkinson's disease.

Depending on their individual needs, clients frequently benefit from rehabilitation therapy with a physical therapist, occupational therapist, social worker, psychologist and/or speech therapist. Therapy can assist in maintaining a person's mobility, muscle tone, balance, and coordination, and can relieve muscle stiffness. A speech therapist will work with language issues and swallowing difficulties. Occupational therapists will assist with problems associated with activities of daily living such as dressing, bathing, or other home chores.

What Can I Do?

Family support for the person with Parkinson's disease is extremely important. Support and assistance should address the individual needs that the person is experiencing. The family will need to recognize that their loved one may be experiencing a loss of function and will need assistance both physically and emotionally.

Families may need additional teaching from the person's healthcare providers or support groups in the following areas:

- Preventive measures are extremely important when caring for clients who have Parkinson's disease. Preventing malnutrition, falls and other environmental accidents, constipation, skin breakdown from incontinence or immobility, and joint contractures.

Understanding Parkinson's Disease (cont.)



- ✚ Incorporating safety needs. Keeping pathways free of obstacles, providing adequate lighting, encouraging the use of non-slip footwear etc.
- ✚ Gait training and exercises for improving ambulation, speech, swallowing, and performance of self-care. Families can be especially helpful in implementing specific exercises to improve eating and speaking.

Families may benefit greatly from learning as much as possible about Parkinson's disease and how to cope with the symptoms their loved ones may be exhibiting. This is especially important when dealing with communication or dementia issues. There are many good resources available on the internet or speak with your loved one's healthcare provider or therapist.

Support groups are also very beneficial for families. Families can express concerns or just discuss issues with other people who are experiencing some of the same things. Support groups can also be a resource of valuable information regarding Parkinson's disease that may provide assistance with coping skills.

Most importantly, the family needs to do what they can to take care of themselves – eating healthy, getting enough exercise and rest. Make time for yourself and accepting support from family and friends when it's offered. When you take care of yourself, it allows you to take better care of your loved one with Parkinson's disease.

For more information regarding Parkinson's disease, click [HERE](#).