

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET



HEALTH DIVISION
Department of Health & Human Services

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Parkinson's Disease - A Brain Disorder

What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is a slowly progressive disorder, generally associated with trembling of the limbs, stiffness, as well as rigidity of the muscles and slowness of movement. This disorder is named after James Parkinson who first described it in 1817.

The cause of Parkinson's disease is unknown, although experts believe that a chemical imbalance in the brain leads to its signs and symptoms. There is no evidence that the disease is contagious. It is rarely found in people younger than 40, and it affects both men and women across all ethnic lines.

Parkinson's disease is diagnosed by examination. The signs and symptoms vary from patient to patient. In many cases, Parkinson's disease may be first manifested in the form of a slight tremor in one hand or arm. Over time, the tremor may involve both arms and legs. Tremor may become more pronounced when patients are under emotional stress. Parkinsonian tremor usually decreases during physical activity and always disappears during sleep.

Muscle stiffness or rigidity is another early sign. Patients with Parkinson's disease may first notice rigidity when they begin having difficulty getting out of a chair or turning. Fine movements such as buttoning and unbuttoning clothing may also become difficult.

Slowness of movement and difficulty in starting movement may appear at the same time as rigidity. Walking may require some effort. Occasionally, the patient may stop walking and find it difficult to start again. In severe cases, there may be a tendency to walk with small, quick, shuffling steps while bending slightly forward.

There may be additional signs and symptoms, such as a fixed facial expression, balance problems, diminishing size of handwriting, or a decrease in voice volume.

Signs and symptoms of Parkinson's disease appear gradually and in no particular order. Many years may pass before these signs and symptoms impair daily activities.

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How is Parkinson's disease treated?

Although there is presently no known cure or prevention for Parkinson's disease, many people respond to drug and physical therapy. Appropriate treatment may keep patients with Parkinson's disease working and enjoying active lives for many years.

The goal of medical treatment is to control signs and symptoms. Since there is a great deal of variation in the responses of different individuals to different drugs, it is often necessary for the physician to adjust the medication and the dosage periodically. Also, it is important for you to take the medication exactly as prescribed by your doctor. If there is any question regarding the medication, you should ask your physician to clarify it. You should not modify the dosage on your own.

Physical therapy, as prescribed by your doctor or a physical therapist, can help with daily tasks and with walking and posture. Occupational therapy such as crafts can help improve finger and hand dexterity and coordination. Speech therapy may be helpful if there is severe rigidity in the facial and lip muscles.

Do not be discouraged. Many patients with Parkinson's disease have continued to lead full lives and maintain active careers. It takes time to adjust to the disease; the sooner you make the adjustment, the earlier you can get on with your active life.

Control of Parkinson's disease is very difficult if you do not take an active role in managing the disease. An active role includes communication with your physician and asking for clarification if there is any question. You should let the physician know if there has been any improvement as well as any problems.

Support from a spouse and other family members also helps the patient with Parkinson's disease adjust better. This support can take several forms: verbal encouragement, exercising with you, keeping you involved in family activities, listening, and helping you deal with any emotional difficulties.

Summary.

With proper medication, patience, and perseverance to stay active, your signs and symptoms may be controlled for many years. Communicate openly with your physician and your family, and make an effort to talk with other patients with Parkinson's disease who may share many of your experiences.

For more information on Parkinson's Disease, call (248) 858-1406 or toll free 1 (800) 848-5533.

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