

Parkinson's Disease

What every patient
should know

This brochure was developed through a coordinated project with the Section on Geriatrics of the American Physical Therapy Association. Student physical therapists and student physical therapist assistants were invited to create educational brochures for the Section's consumer focus.

The Section on Geriatrics applauds the efforts of:

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Parkinson's Disease: What every patient should know

Parkinson's Disease is a degenerative disease of the neurons (brain cells) in the substantia nigra, a part of the brain that controls and regulates movement of the body. The substantia nigra produces dopamine, a chemical communicator, called a neurotransmitter, which is utilized by many other parts of the brain. When the neurons in the substantia nigra die, dopamine levels decline causing messages to the muscles to not be relayed properly. This is the main cause for the following symptoms of Parkinson's.

Early Symptoms

Staring and lack of blinking
Failure to swing one arm when walking
Stooped posture
Frozen, painful shoulder
Limping and dragging one leg
Numbness, tingling, aching in neck and limbs
Softness of voice
Internal and resting tremors
Depression and anxiety

**Parkinson's also affects the autonomic nervous system, causing constipation, sexual dysfunction, difficulty urinating, and excessive sweating.

How quickly does Parkinson's progress?

It varies among individuals. Some people progress to the advanced stages in 5 years, some take 15 or more.

Who gets Parkinson's?

More men than women seem to get the disease. The frequency is higher in Caucasians than other populations in the U.S. The average age of onset is 60 years and your chances increase with advanced age.

Is Parkinson's genetic?

It is unlikely that Parkinson's is a genetically inherited disease. There may be a genetic marker that when combined with the right environmental circumstances causes the onset of Parkinson's, but the exact cause is unknown.

Moderate Symptoms

Increased tremors
Rigidity in muscles
Foot cramps
Swallowing difficulties and drooling
Walking and balance difficulties

Advanced Symptoms

Cognitive decline and behavioral changes
Communication problems
Falls
Difficulty with normal tasks
Weight loss

What are my treatment options?

Your doctor can inform you on the many drug treatments available.

Physical therapy is another option. A physical therapist can evaluate you and set up an individualized program to meet your needs. They will help you increase balance and gait, adapt your home environment to your changing needs, teach you ways to overcome some of the symptoms, such as freezing, and teach your caregiver things that they can assist you with to keep you independent for as long as possible.

Occupational and speech therapy are also recommended to help you with swallowing and speech difficulties and teach you new ways to overcome the challenges that you may encounter doing your activities of daily living.

References:

Weiner, W., Shulman, L., Lang, A. Parkinson's Disease, A complete guide for patients and families. Baltimore: The John's Hopkins University Press, 2001.