



Patient Information

Parkinson Disease Management

Parkinson disease—or PD for short—is a disorder of certain nerve cells in the brain, affecting the way you move. These nerve cells are responsible for creating an important chemical called dopamine (doe-pa-meen). As you age, some of the nerve cells in your brain break down, leading to a shortage of dopamine. With a shortage of dopamine, the brain has trouble sending messages to your muscles about how and when to move.

PD is a progressive disease without a cure and slowly gets worse over many years. However, many good treatments exist, which can help you live a full life.

How do I know if I'm at risk?

There is no blood test or lab test that can tell a doctor if you have PD. The condition is diagnosed after others have been ruled out. Your doctor checks your medical history and performs a physical examination. To confirm the diagnosis, your doctor may give you a medication called levodopa (lev-ah-doe-puh), which is used to treat the symptoms of PD. If your shaking and muscle stiffness respond to this drug, you most likely have PD.

What are the warning signs?

The 4 main symptoms of PD are

- Shaking or trembling of the hands, arms, or legs.
- Stiff muscles.
- Slow movement.
- Difficulty with balance or walking.

Symptoms usually show up between the ages of 50 and 60, but in some, symptoms

may show up earlier. If you have PD, at first these symptoms may affect only 1 side of your body, becoming better as you move and worse when you're at rest. Some people with PD feel weak or tired, have excess saliva, or find speaking or swallowing difficult. As the disease progresses, symptoms may change, or new ones—including depression, anxiety, sleeplessness, or bladder or bowel control problems—may appear.

When do I need medical attention?

Dial 911 immediately if you experience sudden numbness, tingling, weakness, or loss of movement in your face, arm, or leg, particularly on only 1 side of your body. Seek emergency services if you have sudden vision changes, sudden trouble speaking, sudden confusion, or trouble understanding simple statements, sudden problems with walking or balance, or a sudden, severe headache that is different from past headaches.

After asking questions about your symptoms and your health history, your physician will do a neurologic exam, which includes questions and nerve tests. You may not need treatment with mild symptoms, and your physician may wait to prescribe medication until your symptoms start to affect your daily life.

If you have already been diagnosed with PD, contact your physician if

- You note a significant difference in your symptoms, such as severe episodes of freezing, sudden immobility, which may affect your walking.



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- Your medication response changes.
- You or your family note that you have problems with memory and cognitive skills.
- You experience depression.

How can I avoid the problem?

Since the cause of PD is still unknown, prevention remains a mystery.

The following are some energy-conserving tips to help avoid problems once you have a diagnosis of PD.

- **Plan ahead for activities, such as chores, exercise, and recreation.** Space them throughout the day with the more difficult tasks scheduled at your most energetic time.
- **Rest before and after activities.** You may need to stop an activity and finish on another day when you feel more energetic.
- **After each meal, rest for 20 to 30 minutes.** Don't schedule activities right after a meal.
- **Delegate tasks to family and friends.** Ask for help.
- **Get a good night's sleep.** Elevate your head while sleeping. Limit naps so as not to interfere with being able to sleep at night.

How is it treated?

There is no known treatment to stop or reverse the breakdown of nerve cells that causes PD, but drugs can help you find relief from many symptoms of the disease. You can also help maintain strength, mobility, and independence by:

- **Exercise.** With your doctor's permission, climb steps, resting part of the way if you become tired.

- **Physical therapy.** Though physical therapy can't cure PD, you can compensate for the changes brought about by the condition by learning about new movement techniques, strategies, and equipment.
- **Occupational therapy.** An occupational therapist can help you by improving your skills, showing you alternative ways to complete tasks, or introducing you to handy equipment.
- **New routine.** Simplify your daily activities and arrange your furniture and other commonly used items so you can move around easier and get to things in your home.

Tips for Getting Dressed

- Sit in a chair with armrests for balance.
- Get your pants on over your hips by rolling side to side.
- Wear loose-fitting clothes with elastic waistbands.
- Choose clothing with large, flat buttons, zippers, or hook and loop enclosures.
- Use slip-on shoes or elastic shoelaces so you can slip your shoes on and off without untying the laces.

For more information, visit the National Parkinson Foundation Web site at www.parkinson.org.

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