

Support for People with Parkinson's

Suppose you or someone you know has just been told 'you have Parkinson's'. What do you, your family and friends need to know about how it will affect your life? There are people who can answer your questions, offer support and reassure you that you are not alone. Here are some of the simple facts about Parkinson's.

What is Parkinson's? Movement in our bodies is normally controlled by a chemical called dopamine. It carries signals between the nerves in our brain. When cells that normally produce dopamine die, the symptoms of Parkinson's appear. It is called a neurodegenerative disease. There is currently no cure but many promising research projects are underway. You can live with Parkinson's for years and it progresses at a different rate in each person.

How is Parkinson's diagnosed and treated? A diagnosis of Parkinson's can take time to arrive at. Your family doctor might notice it first and refer you to a neurologist, a specialist who deals with Parkinson's. Since there are no x-rays or tests to confirm Parkinson's, the neurologist will check your medical history; do a careful physical examination and certain tests to rule out other conditions that resemble Parkinson's. The most common symptoms are tremors, slowness, stiffness, impaired balance and rigidity of the muscles. Other symptoms that may occur are fatigue, soft speech, writing problems, stooped posture, constipation and sleep disturbance.

Parkinson's is treated with medication which can lessen the symptoms. Physical and occupational therapy and exercise are beneficial and can improve flexibility and reduce stiffness. As symptoms evolve, more medication is often needed. You need to know that while drugs will help you function better, they are not perfect and may cause side effects. In some circumstances, a small percentage of people may benefit from surgery.

If you have Parkinson's take charge of your own health. Listen to the advice of your doctor, ideally a neurologist, and make decisions about treatment based on correct information. Finding the right treatment balance takes time. Keep a diary of what does and doesn't work and discuss it with your health care team.

Keep informed. Learn as much as you can about the illness. As your symptoms evolve, your treatment will need to be adjusted. There are many options which may benefit you as your condition changes. Talk to your doctor if you feel depressed as this common side effect can be managed.

Exercise, exercise, exercise. Walk every day. Ask a friend or family member to join you. See a physiotherapist who can recommend exercises and stretches to suit you. Eat properly by including fiber and fluid in your diet to control constipation which is a common problem for many people with Parkinson's.

As a caregiver of a person with Parkinson's you may feel overwhelmed with your new or ongoing responsibilities. Talking about the role you will play and offering physical and emotional support when needed are some first steps. You will form part of your loved one's team along with health care

providers, family and friends. Learn how the symptoms of Parkinson's can be managed by reviewing the doctor's recommendations and talking about available treatment options.

Since medication management is the most important part of controlling Parkinson's symptoms, you can help by keeping a record of medication effectiveness as well as side effects. Your loved one will have good and bad days, as you will. Exercise that is essential therapy for someone with Parkinson's is also good for you as the caregiver. Knowing your limitations and asking for help, be it from homecare, day programs, family or friends, is a sign of strength.