

# Information about Parkinson's disease

## ***What is Parkinson's disease?***

In Parkinson's disease, damage occurs to the brain cells that produce a chemical (called dopamine) which acts as a messenger between other brain cells that control movement. This damage causes symptoms such as:

- shaking ("tremor") of hands, arms or legs while they are relaxed
- stiff arms and legs ("rigidity"), and slow movements ("bradykinesia")
- walking only in a slow shuffle
- difficulty keeping balance

Parkinson's disease affects about 1 or 2 in every 100 people over age 65. It is more common in people over 55 years of age, but it can even happen to people in their 20s.

## ***What causes Parkinson's disease?***

No one is quite sure. It is probably a combination of inherited factors (genes) and toxic factors (chemicals in the environment).

## ***How serious is Parkinson's disease?***

Parkinson's disease usually develops and worsens very slowly. Early in the course of the disease, fatigue and trouble sleeping may be present.

Most people with Parkinson's disease can live a productive life for many years, but some have more problems with the muscles and nerves than others.

Although there presently is no treatment to "cure" Parkinson's disease, there are medicines to control it and new treatments are being developed every year.

## ***How does my doctor know I have Parkinson's disease?***

It is not always easy. Parkinson's disease may have some of the same symptoms as other diseases, and there are no specific blood tests or x-rays for it. To help make sure that you have Parkinson's disease, your doctor will take a thorough medical and medication history and will examine your muscles and nerves. The doctor also may want you to have some special tests to be sure you do not have something else.

If the medicines used to treat Parkinson's disease don't help, you may have another disease instead, and your doctor may want you to go to a neurologist (a doctor who specializes in nerve diseases).

## ***How is Parkinson's disease treated?***

Start by eating healthy foods and exercising every day. If you begin to feel "blue" or depressed, talk to your doctor.

At first, you might not take any medicine at all. Later, if symptoms keep you from doing what you want or normally do, your doctor may suggest one or more medicines.

Even if your medicine seems to stop working, keep taking it as prescribed until you can tell your doctor about it.

## ***What are some side effects of the medicines for Parkinson's disease?***

The most common side effects of these medicines are dizziness and sleepiness. Others are nausea, headache, or constipation. Some people may be sensitive to the medicine and get confused or have hallucinations (they see things or hear voices that aren't really there).

Tell your doctor if you or your family members notice any of these problems. Your family may notice these problems before you do. They are more likely to occur when you start taking a new medicine for Parkinson's disease or when your doctor changes the dose.

## ***Can anything else help Parkinson's disease?***

Yes. Your doctor can help you decide the most appropriate options. Surgery can sometimes help when medicine or other treatments are not working.

## ***Where can I get more information?***

The following groups offer information about Parkinson's disease:

Parkinson Society Canada/Société Parkinson Canada  
**L [www.Parkinson.ca](http://www.Parkinson.ca)**

American Parkinson Disease Association  
**L [www.APDAparkinson.com](http://www.APDAparkinson.com)**

Awakenings **L [www.ParkinsonsDisease.com](http://www.ParkinsonsDisease.com)**

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Adapted from: The American Academy of Family Physicians, 1999: <http://www.aafp.org/afp/990415ap/990415a.html>; and "Early Diagnosis and Medical Treatment of Parkinson's": <http://www.parkinson.ca/pd/nd.html>

