

What is Parkinson's disease?

This Help sheet gives a basic outline of Parkinson's disease, including its causes, symptoms and diagnosis.

The information here is only a guide. It is very important that people with Parkinson's see a specialist doctor such as a neurologist for expert advice on available treatments and ongoing monitoring of symptoms.

What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is a condition that affects movement. People with Parkinson's have problems controlling the muscles of the body due to a breakdown of messages from the brain. These problems get worse over time.

The name Parkinson's disease comes from the British doctor who first described the symptoms in 1817, Dr James Parkinson. Many people prefer to use the shorter term 'Parkinson's' rather than 'Parkinson's disease'.

What causes Parkinson's disease?

The causes of Parkinson's are not known. We do know that people with Parkinson's have low levels of a brain chemical called dopamine. Dopamine helps the brain to control the muscles and move the body smoothly and easily. Over time, people with Parkinson's have less dopamine, making movement more difficult.

How does it affect people?

Parkinson's affects each person differently and symptoms can vary on different days.

The main symptoms are:

- **Shaking:** shaking or trembling in a part of the body, such as the hand, leg or head. This movement is automatic and out of the person's control. The tremor usually occurs when the person is resting.
- **Stiff muscles:** muscles such as leg, neck or face muscles may look or feel stiff. People with Parkinson's may sometimes feel so stiff they feel frozen and unable to move.
- **Slow movement:** movement can be slow and people may take small steps or shuffle when walking. Small movements such as writing, typing, shaving or buttoning up clothes can also be difficult.
- **Balance** problems or difficulty standing up straight.

Other problems that can affect people with Parkinson's include:

- Tiredness or exhaustion
- Sadness or depression
- Problems with balance
- Constipation
- Difficulty speaking or swallowing
- Problems doing more than one thing at a time.

Parkinson's does not cause death and people can continue to enjoy a long and productive life.

It may take many years for symptoms to progress to a point where they cause major problems. When they do, many of these symptoms can be managed with treatment and support.



Who gets Parkinson's?

Any adult can get Parkinson's. It is one of the most common brain conditions in Australia and 25 people are diagnosed every day:

- It is more common among people aged over 60 years.
- It can affect adults of any age.
- It affects both men and women from all cultures and lifestyles.
- It is not contagious, meaning that you can not catch it or pass it on to someone else.
- It is not usually hereditary.

How is it diagnosed?

Parkinson's can be difficult to diagnose because everyone has different symptoms. The early signs of Parkinson's are usually mild and affect only one side of the body. Some people first notice a mild shaking or tremor or problems with writing, shaving or doing up buttons. Another common early sign is that one arm no longer swings when walking.

There is no one test or procedure that can identify Parkinson's. The best person to diagnose Parkinson's is a specialist doctor such as a neurologist. The doctor will observe the patient for symptoms and ask them to describe the problems they are experiencing. Scans (pictures) of the brain may be taken to make sure the problems are not being caused by another condition.

Can Parkinson's be treated?

Medications, treatments and therapies are available to help manage the symptoms of Parkinson's. It is very important that people with Parkinson's see a specialist doctor such as a neurologist for advice on available medications and ongoing monitoring of symptoms.

Can Parkinson's be cured?

Unfortunately we do not yet know of any way to cure Parkinson's or to slow its progression. New and better treatments and medications are being researched, giving us some hope for the future.

Remember:

People with Parkinson's can continue to enjoy a long and productive life with support, information and treatment.

For further information & support contact:

Parkinson's Australia: 1800 644 189

To speak to us in a language other than English:

Phone: **131 450** and ask for an interpreter in your language to connect you to Parkinson's Australia in your state or territory. This is a free service.

This and other help sheets are available in a range of community languages. Contact us or download them from our website.

www.parkinsons.org.au

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