



An Overview of Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease is a complex and long-term condition that affects each person differently. Learning that you have Parkinson's can be frightening but there are lots of things you can do to live well and feel in control of your daily life.

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What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease or Parkinson's is a long-term condition that affects the way the brain works. Symptoms such as uncontrollable shaking (tremors), stiffness, slowed movement and difficulty balancing usually emerge slowly and over a long period of time.

Parkinson's disease is not a fatal illness. While there is currently no cure for Parkinson's, there are lots of different options to address its different symptoms, manage the disease, and help you continue to enjoy a good quality of life. These include medicines and support therapies, diet modifications, and exercise.

If you're able to have regular appointments with a doctor or specialist, your condition can be monitored, and you can be offered the right support. If you do not have access to a healthcare professional who can help monitor your condition, please [contact us](#) to see if we can help.

What are the symptoms of Parkinson's disease?

There are more than 40 symptoms of Parkinson's disease, and they include motor symptoms and non-motor symptoms. Motor symptoms are those



symptoms that affect a person's movement and muscle control while non-motor symptoms don't affect movement.

It is important to note that no two people with Parkinson's have the same symptoms and not everyone will get all the symptoms in the same order.

The three main symptoms of Parkinson's disease are:

- ★ tremors
- ★ slowness of movement (also known as bradykinesia)
- ★ muscle stiffness (rigidity)

You might also experience other common symptoms such as:

- ★ feeling off balance (postural instability)
- ★ difficulty making facial expressions
- ★ slow or slurred speech
- ★ difficulty swallowing or chewing
- ★ reduced sense of smell
- ★ tiredness and a lack of energy

The symptoms of Parkinson's disease are usually mild at first and progress gradually over time. Eventually, they may affect your ability to work or do everyday activities and you may need help taking care of yourself.

To find out more, read our article on the [Symptoms of Parkinson's disease](#).

What causes Parkinson's disease?

We don't know exactly what causes Parkinson's disease, but we do know that it develops when certain cells in the brain stop producing a chemical called dopamine.



Dopamine sends messages from one brain cell to another and to other parts of the body, like the muscles. So, when it stops being produced it causes movement difficulty and other symptoms of Parkinson's disease.

It's not clear why or how cells stop producing dopamine, but experts believe a variety of genetic and environmental factors are involved.

You cannot 'catch' Parkinson's disease from another person who has it and it's nothing to do with [being a witch or being cursed](#). To find out more, read our article on the [Causes of Parkinson's disease](#).

Are there different types of Parkinson's disease?

There are various types of parkinsonism, which is the umbrella term covering a range of conditions including Parkinson's disease.

The three main types of parkinsonism are:

Idiopathic Parkinson's disease

This is the most common form and what we refer to as Parkinson's disease. Idiopathic means that the cause is unknown. The main symptoms are tremors, stiffness and slowness of movement.

Vascular parkinsonism

Vascular parkinsonism may occur when the blood supply to the brain has become restricted, often after a mild stroke or series of strokes. Common symptoms include difficulty with movement and balance, stiffness, limb weakness and trouble sleeping.



Drug-induced parkinsonism

Sometimes, drugs that are used to block the production of dopamine in the brain can cause parkinsonism. This type of parkinsonism usually only affects a small number of people. Most recover after they stop taking the drug that's causing their symptoms.

In addition to these three main types, there are several diseases that are called atypical Parkinson's disorders. They all have at least one symptom that is common in people with Parkinson's, but they have a different underlying cause and may progress more quickly. They include:

- ★ Progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP)
- ★ Multiple system atrophy (MSA)
- ★ Dementia with Lewy bodies (DLB)
- ★ Corticobasal syndrome (CBS)[CTI]

What are the stages of Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's Disease is progressive, which means that the symptoms are mild at first but get worse over time. There are different classifications of the stages of Parkinson's, but generally speaking, the disease can be divided into three main stages:

Mild or early stage

At this stage your symptoms will probably be mild. Medication along with exercise and a healthy diet may help keep them in check and slow the progress of your symptoms.



Moderate stage

As your symptoms develop, they could begin to affect your daily routine, including getting in and out of bed, cooking, driving and eating, even if you're on medication.

Advanced stage

This stage is not as common as the two above, in fact some people's Parkinson's disease won't ever progress this far. If it does, then you may develop serious disabilities and you'll need regular care and support.

To find out more, read our article on the [Stages of Parkinson's disease](#).

How is Parkinson's disease treated?

Although there is currently no cure for Parkinson's disease, medication, physical activity, therapies and even surgery may be available to help you control your symptoms. Healthy eating and other lifestyle changes may also help you live comfortably.

Medication for Parkinson's Disease

Medication is the main treatment for Parkinson's disease and there are several types of medication used. You should discuss your symptoms and any concerns you have with your doctor. They may want to do some tests. After this, they may recommend medication depending on what's available and right for you. Please see [Treatment Options](#) for more information about this.

Physical activity for Parkinson's disease

Regular exercise can help you feel stronger and boost your mental wellbeing too. Research has also found that doing certain types of exercise at the right



intensity can actually slow down your symptoms. To learn more, check out our article on [Physical exercise and Parkinson's disease](#).

Support therapies for Parkinson's disease

Depending on the healthcare available to you, support therapies can provide essential health and lifestyle support for people living with Parkinson's disease. Physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech and language therapy can all help make life easier.

Lifestyle changes for Parkinson's disease

Eating a healthy, balanced [diet](#) can help you manage your symptoms. And some people with Parkinson's may benefit physically and mentally from relaxation techniques, such as meditation and acupuncture.

To find out more, read our article on [treatments for Parkinson's disease](#).

Learning that you have Parkinson's disease can be very difficult. You may probably feel shocked and confused and have lots of questions. As well as the information on this website there are also several Parkinson's disease support groups across Africa.

These groups can provide support and social interaction, where you can share your experiences and hear from other people living with Parkinson's in Africa.

If you would like more information, read our article on [Living with Parkinson's disease](#).



Sources (all accessed June 2022)

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