



# Physical exercise and Parkinson's disease

Exercise is particularly beneficial for you if you have Parkinson's disease. It can improve the quality of your life and may even help slow your condition down. From mind-body exercise like dancing to aerobic sports and simple home workouts, getting active can help control your symptoms and give you more independence. Exercise is also recommended as a treatment because it gives you neuro (brain) protection.

Here's some useful information on exercising when you're living with Parkinson's disease, including how to get started, top exercise benefits and what types of exercise are recommended.

## **Table of Content**

What are the benefits of physical exercise for Parkinson's disease?.....	2
Can exercise slow down Parkinson's disease? .....	2
Can Parkinson's disease be reversed with exercise? .....	3
Does exercise work to change the brain? .....	3
Do I still need to take my Parkinson's medication if I exercise? .....	4
What's the best type of exercise if I have Parkinson's disease?.....	4
Aerobic exercise.....	5
Balance and stretching .....	5
Strength training .....	6



Getting started with exercise when you have Parkinson's disease ..... 7

## What are the benefits of physical exercise for Parkinson's disease?

Exercise is good for all of us, but it's especially beneficial if you have Parkinson's disease.

Research shows that if you have Parkinson's disease, regular exercise benefits you both physically and mentally. Studies show that doing 2.5 hours of exercise a week can help improve your symptoms and slow down progression.

Exercise can help you carry on doing everyday things for yourself, like getting dressed or turning over in bed. This means you'll have a better quality of life and feel more in control of your condition, giving you much more confidence.

## Can exercise slow down Parkinson's disease?

Definitely. Exercise is important for slowing down your condition and improving Parkinson's symptoms. It can help improve your:

- ★ Parkinson's tremor
- ★ brain and heart health
- ★ posture, flexibility and balance
- ★ speech and swallowing
- ★ strength, energy and stamina
- ★ mood and confidence



- ★ sleep quality
- ★ bladder and bowel control
- ★ sex life

A regular exercise program also reduces:

- ★ fatigue
- ★ depression
- ★ muscle and joint injuries
- ★ bone wasting (osteoporosis)
- ★ shoulder, hip and back pain

## Can Parkinson's disease be reversed with exercise?

Unfortunately, exercise can't reverse Parkinson's disease, but it can slow it down enough so you can maintain a good quality of life. It can delay the onset of later symptoms and it's never too late to start – just start exercising as soon as you can to get the maximum results.

## Does exercise work to change the brain?

Yes, in the sense that exercise improves your brain health. Evidence shows that intensive aerobic exercise can slow the loss of brain cells (neurodegeneration). Experts think it's because this kind of exercise produces chemicals called neurotrophic factors that work to protect the brain.

Exercise can also help improve brain plasticity. That's the ability of your brain to adapt and grow better and healthier.

As if that's not enough, exercise also releases the brain chemical dopamine and it helps you sleep better.



## Do I still need to take my Parkinson's medication if I exercise?

You should continue to take your Parkinson's medication. Exercise isn't a replacement for your medication, it works alongside it to improve your symptoms and your brain health.

You might end up feeling that exercise is working so well for you that you want to reduce your medication, but medication can help get you exercising in the first place. Always chat with your healthcare provider about your medication before reducing or changing it.

## What's the best type of exercise if I have Parkinson's disease?

There isn't one type of exercise that is best for everyone with Parkinson's disease. The important thing is to find something that suits you, depending on your own symptoms, your lifestyle and your individual challenges. It should be something you enjoy doing and easy to do, because that way you're more likely to keep it up and feel the benefits.

It's a good idea to mix and match types of exercise, as research shows people living with Parkinson's can benefit from improving different aspects of their physical health, including heart and lung capacity, balance, flexibility and strength.



## Aerobic exercise

Aerobic activities are ones that get your heart and lungs working, so you feel slightly out of breath and sweaty. It's a broad type of exercise, which includes walking, running and cycling, meaning you should be able to find a type that suits you.

- ★ If you're starting an exercise program for the first time, ease yourself in with light aerobic activities such as brisk walks, dancing or swimming. These are low-impact types of exercise, meaning they don't put pressure on your joints.
- ★ If your symptoms are mild or you're newly diagnosed and already active, you can try high-energy aerobic exercise, such as running, hill walking or gym circuits. Regular high-intensity treadmill exercise has been shown to help maintain your movement ability (motor skills).
- ★ If your symptoms are complex, focus on everyday activities and chair-based exercises, such as standing up and sitting down, or moving your legs and arms while you sit.

## Balance and stretching

This type of exercise has big physical benefits if you're living with Parkinson's and can also stimulate your cognitive (brain) functioning.

It includes dancing and racquet sports, such as tennis.

It also includes mind-body exercise types like Tai chi, which has added stress-relieving benefits. These are gentle types of exercise but can be adjusted according to your Parkinson's symptoms:

- ★ Dancing, while keeping to the rhythm of the music, is one of the best exercises you can do. Keeping to the beat may be difficult at times,



depending on your symptoms, but it can also really help reduce symptoms so it's worth sticking with. And it can be done wherever with no special equipment. Getting other people involved may make it more enjoyable.

- ★ Tai chi is a martial art that focuses on flowing movements and meditation. There have been studies into the benefits for people with Parkinson's and some evidence to show that regular Tai chi sessions can help prevent falls, although more research is needed.
- ★ Yoga is great for your strength and flexibility but can also help you relax and feel less anxious. There are lots of different types of yoga so it's important to get advice on the one that's best for you.
- ★ Pilates is a form of body conditioning developed to help with recovery from injuries. It's great for muscle tone and flexibility. And, because you need to focus on your breath, it also relieves stress.

## Strength training

This is exercise that involves using your own body weight or equipment to improve your muscle strength and tone.

- ★ If you're new to exercise, or your Parkinson's symptoms are complex, you can benefit from simple home workouts, such as chair routines. You could progress to using resistance bands or light weights, including household items like bottles.
- ★ High-intensity resistance training such as using weight machines or heavier free weights may be more suitable if you have mild symptoms or you're newly diagnosed with Parkinson's and already active.
- ★ You don't necessarily need kit to do strength training. Gardening is a great muscle-strengthening exercise, as you use your body weight to do tasks such as digging and lifting. Same for yoga – if you're able to do



more dynamic forms, you will support your own body weight in certain poses.

## Getting started with exercise when you have Parkinson's disease

If you're feeling inspired to start or build up your exercise routine, follow our simple steps to success:

- ★ Always talk to your doctor before you start regular exercise. They'll be able to recommend exercises for Parkinson's disease suited to your symptoms and wellbeing. You could also ask a physical therapist or a local support group, if you have access to them.
- ★ Pace yourself. Start slowly and build up to exercising for longer periods and more strenuous activities if you are able. Progressing your activity level gradually will help you to stay on track with your exercise plan. For example, with aerobic exercise, start with no more than three days a week, progressing to five days a week gradually over time. Aim for two to three hours over these five days.
- ★ Make the most of times when your body feels ready and you feel motivated to get some exercise in.
- ★ Keep a record of your activity and how you're feeling afterwards – lots of people find it motivates them.
- ★ Make sure you have a safe space if you're exercising at home. Have someone with you when you exercise, especially if you're concerned about your balance. They'll also be there to help and encourage you as you get used to your new routine.
- ★ If you're getting active outside of your home, exercise with friends or join a support group to help you stay on track with your exercise program. If



you can find a group exercise class, this will also give you a chance to socialise and maybe even get support from others.

- ★ Speak to your doctor if your Parkinson's symptoms get worse after exercise, or you feel exercise is getting more difficult over time.

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