



Women and Parkinson's

Being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease or thinking you might have symptoms will no doubt come as a shock. Women have a lower risk of Parkinson's disease than men but can still develop the condition. The disease can progress differently in women, so you may have different symptoms and respond differently to treatment. Find out the most common signs of Parkinson's disease in women and learn how pregnancy, periods and menopause can affect your symptoms.

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Do women get Parkinson's disease?

Yes, unfortunately Parkinson's can affect anyone, although men are twice as likely than women to develop the condition.

It's thought women may be less likely to develop the condition because they're less likely to work with harmful chemicals. Jobs like farming or factory work involve working with chemicals and pesticides that have been linked to Parkinson's.

Severe head injuries have also been linked to the risk of developing Parkinson's and women may be less likely to injure their heads.

Biological differences between men and women may also play a role, as the female hormone oestrogen may protect against developing the disease. Research has found that oestrogen has protective benefits for the brain.

What are the early signs of Parkinson's disease in women?

There are many early signs of Parkinson's disease. And, while later symptoms of Parkinson's can differ between men and women, early signs are similar.

At first, Parkinson's often causes only mild symptoms like depression and difficulty sleeping, and it's easy to overlook these. Years can pass before motor symptoms are obvious enough to make someone go see their doctor.

It is important to note that having some signs and symptoms of Parkinson's doesn't necessarily mean that you have the condition, as other illnesses could



have similar symptoms as Parkinson's. If you're at all concerned, it's always best to talk to your healthcare provider.

Learn about the [early signs of Parkinson's](#).

How does Parkinson's disease progress in women?

As Parkinson's disease progresses, symptoms develop differently in women compared to men.

If you're a woman with Parkinson's you're more likely to experience more symptoms that are not related to movement (non-motor symptoms) including:

- ★ fatigue
- ★ anxiety
- ★ depression
- ★ restless legs
- ★ constipation
- ★ pain
- ★ loss of taste or smell
- ★ weight change
- ★ excessive sweating
- ★ bowel problems

You're also more likely than a man to develop trouble with balance (postural instability). This means you're at greater risk of falls than a man.



However, you're more likely to have fewer problems with speech, attention and memory.

Find out more about [Parkinson's disease symptoms](#).

Do men and women respond differently to Parkinson's treatments?

There's not enough gender-specific research to say that women respond differently to Parkinson's treatments compared to men.

However, because levodopa is the most common drug treatment for Parkinson's and has been around for a long time, we have more information on it. Some studies suggest that, as a woman, you're more likely to experience side-effects from the drug.

For example, you're more likely to experience involuntary movements (dyskinesia) as a side effect of levodopa. This may be because women are given similar doses to men despite weighing less on average. You can always talk to your healthcare provider about adjusting your treatment dose if side effects are bothering you.

Parkinson's and the menstrual cycle

If you're a woman with young onset Parkinson's disease (YOPD) you may also have periods alongside your Parkinson's symptoms to contend with. In addition, you may find your symptoms are worse around the time of your period. This is because levels of oestrogen, which protects against Parkinson's,



are at their lowest just before and during your period. But you can always speak to your healthcare provider if you're struggling to manage your Parkinson's symptoms during your period.

Let them know, for example, if you feel more tired, or have worse tremors, balance and anxiety.

Parkinson's can also make it difficult to use your hands for small movements (dexterity). This means you may find it harder to clean and care for yourself when you're on your period. Don't be afraid or ashamed to ask a loved one for help with your selfcare. Someone who cares for you will want to help.

Parkinson's and pregnancy

The good news is that Parkinson's disease is unlikely to affect your chances of getting pregnant.

If you become pregnant you may feel anxious about how Parkinson's will affect you and your baby. While some women do find that their Parkinson's symptoms get worse during pregnancy, you will be reassured to know there's every chance you will go on to have a healthy baby.

Speak to a healthcare professional as soon as you find out you're pregnant, ideally before if you're actively trying for a baby. They can explain what antenatal care you'll receive and about managing your Parkinson's symptoms during pregnancy. If you're taking Parkinson's medicine, do not stop taking it until you've talked with them.

Having Parkinson's shouldn't affect how you give birth. Though you might not be able to breastfeed while taking Parkinson's medications because we don't know how much of the drug passes into breast milk.



Tips for managing Parkinson's disease in pregnancy

Morning sickness

Morning sickness can mean you may throw up before your medication has had the chance to be absorbed through your stomach. You can try to avoid this by eating several small meals a day, as well as avoiding high fat and very spicy foods. Starchy foods, such as bread or dry breakfast cereals, can also help with nausea.

Constipation

Constipation is a common Parkinson's symptom that can also happen because you're pregnant. Drink plenty of fluids and have a diet rich in fibre to reduce the risk of becoming constipated.

Fatigue

You may find pregnancy very tiring on top of the fatigue you already experience because of Parkinson's. And your growing bump may also mean you're not as comfortable at night, so sleep can be difficult. Make up for this by resting during the day whenever possible.

Balance problems

Changes to your body shape in pregnancy may affect your sense of balance. Together with your Parkinson's symptoms this can increase the risk of falls. Talk to your healthcare provider for advice on balance and posture.



Parkinson's and menopause

Parkinson's in women is more likely to develop after menopause. This is because your oestrogen levels naturally decrease, and you lose the protection it gives you against Parkinson's.

If you're going through menopause and have Parkinson's, it can be difficult to know whether your symptoms are because of the menopause or Parkinson's. Common menopause symptoms, including fatigue, anxiety, muscle pains and stiffness, are also symptoms of Parkinson's.

Always talk to your healthcare provider if you have any questions about what you're experiencing. It might be a good idea to keep a diary of your concerns and take this to your appointment.

Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT) is the most effective treatment for managing menopause symptoms and works by replacing the hormones your body has stopped producing. It's safe to take HRT alongside Parkinson's medication and can even help your medication work better.

Researchers have looked into whether foods that are rich in phytoestrogens, such as beans, yams, soy products, lentils and wholegrains, can help support oestrogen levels too. There's some evidence that they may help women manage both their menopause symptoms and Parkinson's symptoms, but we need more research to be sure.

Find out more about how a [healthy diet](#) can help to manage symptoms of Parkinson's.



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