



Myths and misconceptions about Parkinson's disease

Across many parts of Africa, false information and a lack of understanding about Parkinson's disease can cause those affected to feel excluded or misunderstood by their communities. A lot of the prejudice and hostility they face is as a result of the myths and misconceptions surrounding Parkinson's disease.

If this is something you've experienced, it could be because of these myths about Parkinson's symptoms. Learn more about the common misconceptions about Parkinson's disease and what the actual facts you should know are.

Table of Content

Common myths about Parkinson's disease	2
Can you catch Parkinson's by touching or being close to someone who has Parkinson's disease?	2
Parkinson's caused by a curse, evil spirits, or witchcraft?	2
Did I get Parkinson's disease because I've done something bad?	3
Does cold weather cause Parkinson's?	3
Is Parkinson's disease a mental illness?	3
Does Parkinson's disease only affect older people?	3
Is Parkinson's fatal?	4
Does Parkinson's disease just affect movement?	4



Can Parkinson's disease be cured?	4
Can traditional approaches help Parkinson's disease?	4
How common myths and misconceptions about Parkinson's disease in Africa can affect you	6

Common myths about Parkinson's disease

If you have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, it does not mean you've been cursed by a witch or you've done something wrong. Parkinson's is caused by a problem with how your brain sends messages to your body. It's a physical disease and can affect anyone – millions of people around the world of every faith and background are living with Parkinson's disease.

Read more about the [causes of Parkinson's disease](#).

Can you catch Parkinson's by touching or being close to someone who has Parkinson's disease?

No, you can't. Parkinson's is not contagious.

Parkinson's caused by a curse, evil spirits, or witchcraft?

No. Parkinson's happens when certain cells in your brain stop working. Experts believe this is caused by a combination of complex genetic and environmental factors. It has nothing to do with being possessed or cursed.



Did I get Parkinson's disease because I've done something bad?

No. Parkinson's disease is a brain condition that has complex causes. It is not a punishment for doing something bad or for breaking a superstitious belief, and it can happen to anyone – young or old people, male or female, people of different cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs, and so on.

Does cold weather cause Parkinson's?

No. You did not develop Parkinson's because you were exposed to cold weather. But having Parkinson's can make you more sensitive to cold temperatures.

Is Parkinson's disease a mental illness?

If you have Parkinson's disease, it doesn't mean you're mad or insane. Parkinson's disease is not a mental problem or psychiatric condition. But it is common for people with Parkinson's disease to develop [mental health disorders](#) like anxiety or depression as part of their symptoms, or because of the stigma they face, or a combination of both.

Does Parkinson's disease only affect older people?

No, it doesn't. Parkinson's is more common in people over 60, [but it can affect younger people too](#). Your risk of developing Parkinson's disease rises as you get older, but it is not a 'normal' part of the ageing process.



Is Parkinson's fatal?

Parkinson's disease is not a terminal condition, but it is progressive, meaning it gradually gets worse over time. However, many people with Parkinson's go on to live long and productive lives, in spite of the challenges the disease presents.

Does Parkinson's disease just affect movement?

Parkinson's has motor (movement) [symptoms and also non-motor symptoms](#), including fatigue, constipation and pain. The exact symptoms vary from person to person, but they can be eased with medical treatment. [Regular exercise](#) and [healthy eating](#) may also help.

Can Parkinson's disease be cured?

There is currently no cure for Parkinson's disease, but scientists around the world are working hard to find one. In the meantime, modern treatments and therapies can help control your Parkinson's symptoms and give you a good quality of life.

Can traditional approaches help Parkinson's disease?

Advanced drugs and therapies are clinically proven to help treat Parkinson's and control the symptoms. Lifestyle changes, such as a [healthy diet](#) and [regular exercise](#), can help too. So far, there's little proof that many traditional remedies help with Parkinson's disease.



There is some evidence that the velvet bean plant (*Mucuna pruriens*) actually contains levodopa (which is what is found in Sinemet and some other common Parkinson's drugs), but research is still ongoing and it is not safe to self-medicate any drugs – whether they are naturally occurring or produced in a pharmacy.

Always get medical advice before taking medication or supplements. Even though the velvet bean plant is natural, it contains active ingredients that could interact with other medicines or treatments, and it's important you take the right amount.

Other traditional medicines or treatments like steam treatments have no scientific basis and may even be harmful.

Some people believe that people with Parkinson's should be removed from the community. This is not right. If you have the condition, help from your community can help you maintain a good quality of life and stay healthy. Parkinson's is not contagious, so there's no reason to shut yourself away.

Having a strong faith can comfort and support you – your faith can give you a more positive outlook and a good sense of community. But Parkinson's disease is a physical condition that needs medical treatment. A doctor is the best person to help you, in the same way that they would if you had a broken bone.



How common myths and misconceptions about Parkinson's disease in Africa can affect you

It's difficult enough to come to terms with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease; and if people around you don't understand Parkinson's disease, it can affect you negatively in added ways.

This is more likely to be the case if you're young, because the symptoms that people can see – slowing down and stooping, for example – aren't often seen in people your age.

Myths and misconceptions can:

- ★ Discourage you from seeking medical help for your symptoms, meaning you can't access treatments and therapies that can help you have a good quality of life.
- ★ Stop you from living well and enjoying everyday life. You might be put off forming relationships or doing activities you enjoy. You may face prejudice at work and experience financial difficulties.
- ★ Leave you feeling isolated when what you need is understanding and support.

There are lots of positive ways you can empower yourself. Knowing the facts about Parkinson's and getting this information from evidence-based sites like Parkinson's Africa is important. It will help you feel reassured and in control of your condition.

Joining a [support group](#) means you'll feel less alone, as it gives you a chance to chat with people who understand the condition and how you're feeling. Read more about [living with Parkinson's disease](#).



Sources (all accessed May 2022):

- ADPA. nd. Mucuna pruriens – a natural remedy for Parkinson's disease? American Parkinson's Disease Association. <https://www.apdaparkinson.org/article/mucuna-pruriens-for-parkinsons-disease/>
- Bower JH. 2017. Understanding Parkinson disease in sub Saharan Africa: A call to action for the international neurologic community. *Parkinsonism Relat Disord* 41:1-2. See Word file
- Dekker MCJ, Coulibaly T, Bardien S, et al. 2020. Parkinson's Disease research on the African continent: obstacles and opportunities. PERSPECTIVE article. *Front Neurol* 19 June 2020 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fneur.2020.00512>
- Dotchin CL, Msuya O, Walker RW. 2007. The challenge of Parkinson's disease management in Africa, *Age and Ageing*, 36(2): 122–127, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ageing/af1172>
- Kaddumukasa M, Kakooza A, Kaddumukasa MN, et al. 2015. Knowledge and Attitudes of Parkinson's Disease in Rural and Urban Mukono District, Uganda: A Cross-Sectional, Community-Based Study. *Parkinson's Disease*, 2015:196150. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC26688774/>
- Khalil H, Chahine LM, Siddiqui J, et al. Parkinson's Disease in the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia: Consensus from the International Parkinson and Movement Disorder Society Task Force for the Middle East. *J Parkinsons Dis*. 2020;10(2):729–741. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8203232/pdf/jpd-10-jpd191751.pdf>
- The Michael J Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research. Ask the MD: Cold weather and Parkinson's. <https://www.michaeljfox.org/news/ask-md-cold-weather-and-parkinsons>
- Mokaya J, Gray WK, Carr J. Beliefs, knowledge and attitudes towards Parkinson's disease among a Xhosa speaking black population in South Africa: A cross-sectional study. *Parkinsonism Relat Disord*. 2017 Aug;41:51–57. See PDF
- Mshana, G., Dotchin, C.L. & Walker, R.W. 'We call it the shaking illness': perceptions and experiences of Parkinson's disease in rural northern Tanzania. *BMC Public Health* 11, 219 (2011). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2458-11-219>

Disclaimer

This article has been put together for informational and educational purposes only. It should not be interpreted to be a diagnosis, treatment or any other type of health care advice. The reader should seek their own medical or professional advice and must not rely on the information contained in this article as an alternative to medical advice from their doctors or other professional



healthcare providers. Parkinson's Africa disclaims any responsibility and liability of any kind in connection with the reader's use of the information.