

Patient Education Material

Diagnosis: Parkinson Disease

The process of making a Parkinson disease diagnosis can be difficult. There is no X-ray or blood test that can confirm Parkinson disease. A physician arrives at the diagnosis only after a thorough examination. Blood tests and brain scans known as magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) may be performed to rule out other conditions that have similar symptoms. People suspected of having Parkinson disease should consider seeking the care of a neurologist who specializes in Parkinson disease.

Definition:

Parkinson disease is a brain disorder. It occurs when certain nerve cells (neurons) in a part of the brain called the substantia nigra die or become impaired. Normally, these cells produce a vital chemical known as dopamine. Dopamine allows smooth, coordinated function of the body's muscles and movement. When approximately 80% of the dopamine-producing cells are damaged, the symptoms of Parkinson disease appear.



Signs & Symptoms:

The loss of dopamine production in the brain causes the primary symptoms of Parkinson disease. The key signs of Parkinson disease are:

- Tremor (shaking)
- Slowness of movement
- Rigidity (stiffness)
- Difficulty with balance

Other signs of Parkinson disease may include:

- Small, cramped handwriting
- Stiff facial expression
- Shuffling walk
- Muffled speech
- Depression

Incidence:

Parkinson disease affects both men and women in almost equal numbers. It shows no social, ethnic, economic or geographic boundaries. In the United States, it is estimated that 60,000 new cases are diagnosed each year, joining the 1.5 million Americans who currently have Parkinson disease. While the condition usually develops after the age of 65, 15% of those diagnosed are under 50.

Treatment (Medications, therapy, surgical procedures):

There are a number of effective medicines that help to ease the symptoms of Parkinson disease. Most symptoms are caused by lack of dopamine. The medicines most commonly used will attempt to either replace or mimic dopamine, which improves the tremor, rigidity and slowness associated with Parkinson disease. Several new medicines are being studied that may slow the progression. Many promise to improve the lives of people with Parkinson disease.

Surgery can ease the symptoms of Parkinson disease, but it is not a cure. Because of the risks associated with brain surgery, it is usually not considered unless all appropriate medications have been tried unsuccessfully. When considering surgery, it is important to see both a neurologist and brain surgeon who specialize in the treatment of Parkinson disease.

Do's & Don'ts (precautions, diet restrictions, risk factors/prevention):

If you have recently been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, it is important to recognize that the condition is one that demands adaptation, not despair. Learning to pace yourself, prioritize goals, and make timely use of physical, occupational and speech therapies will enhance your physical, intellectual, and emotional well-being, and can make all the difference in how you enjoy life and maintain your independence.

Numerous strategies beyond the use of anti-parkinson medications can help you achieve and maintain optimal health status. These include such interventions as establishing an exercise program, learning the most efficient methods to perform routine activities of daily living, and improving nutritional status.

It is a good idea to maintain a personal health file at home, including dates of any major diagnoses, pertinent test reports, immunization records, dates of any serious illnesses or surgeries, allergies to medication, and a list of current medications, including non-prescription drugs and supplements.

Maintaining a positive attitude is one of the healthiest things you can do in response to a diagnosis of Parkinson disease. At first, it is admittedly hard to have confidence that the disease is not a sentence to decline and disability. But given time, people with good self-esteem and an optimistic attitude develop a healthy determination to cope with the illness and sustain the energy, activities, and relationships that give life meaning and joy

Support Groups:

The National Parkinson Foundation sponsors more support groups throughout the United States for people and families living with Parkinson disease. Sometimes people worry that attending such a group might be discouraging to someone recently diagnosed. But more often than not -- particularly if the individual can avoid projecting himself or herself into the place of someone s/he might encounter with advanced disease -- the experience turns out to be extremely encouraging. You are likely to meet people who are doing great despite having Parkinson disease for a number of years, responding well to medications and thoroughly enjoying life.

Support groups offer education, socialization, and an invaluable "all-in-the-same boat" forum, where people genuinely understand your concerns, and share insights into coping with Parkinson disease. Contact your nearest NPF Center of Excellence for a list of support groups in your area, or if there is a link to support groups, include it here.

Further Info: (Web site addresses, phone #'s, etc.):

National Parkinson foundation - <http://www.parkinson.org>

We Move - <http://wemove.org>

American Parkinson Disease Association - <http://www.apdaparkinson.org>

Michael J. Fox Organization - <http://www.michaeljfox.org>

For more information, please contact

Department Name _____

Phone Number and Extension _____