

Parkinson's disease



What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is a common, progressive and debilitating disorder affecting many areas of the nervous system. Historically, it was believed that only dopaminergic neurons in the brain were affected, leading to motor impairments including tremor, rigidity (stiffness), bradykinesia (slow movements), akinesia (freezing or absence of movement) and balance problems. However, because the neurological changes affect many areas of the brain, people may experience a wide range of symptoms including anxiety, depression, impaired cognition, sleep disorders and pain. The body's automatic functions may also be affected by the disease or the medications used to treat it.

How does exercise help with Parkinson's disease?

Evidence from systematic reviews and randomised controlled trials shows that exercise, when used in conjunction with medication, can reduce symptoms, improve mobility, muscle strength and balance, reduce falls and may slow disease progression. Exercise may also have positive effects on mood, fatigue, pain, constipation and may improve cognition and sleep. These benefits can help people with Parkinson's disease to optimise their abilities, improve their quality of life and remain independent for as long as possible. Exercise also provides a means by which individuals can actively participate in the management of their disease.

Things to remember

- Be safe, consult an accredited exercise professional first before commencing an exercise program.
- Don't do too much, too soon and gradually increase the intensity and duration of your workouts.
- Exercise programs should incorporate a variety of different modes of exercise (e.g. aerobic, balance, coordination and progressive resistance).
- One size does not fit all and exercise should be carefully prescribed for the individual.
- Individual preferences for exercise location and methods should be considered to maximise enjoyment and adherence.

What type of exercise is best for Parkinson's disease?

There is no evidence that one specific type of exercise is best for people with Parkinson's disease. Programs should include a variety of types of exercise (e.g. aerobic, balance, coordination and muscle strength) and should commence as soon as possible after diagnosis – though it is never too late to start.

Things to remember

- **Flexibility exercises** – stretching helps you fight the muscle rigidity that comes with Parkinson's and helps your muscles and joints stay flexible. Perform stretches at least 3-4 times a week for at least 10 minutes at a time and hold for 10-30 seconds.
- **Aerobic exercises** – is any activity that works the heart, lungs and muscles and helps the body burn calories. It is recommended that people with Parkinson's aim for 2.5 hours of aerobic exercise per week (30 minutes per day, five times a week). You can be creative and work around any physical limitations.
- **Strengthening exercises** – there is no specific guidelines for strength training for people with Parkinson's. Muscles can be strengthened at any stage and are vital to improving functional ability. Strength training can take the form of lifting weights, using machines at the gym, using your own body weight for resistance or using common household items. It's recommended that strength exercises are performed at least 10-15 times, 2-3 days per week focusing on five main muscle groups (core muscles, thigh muscles, buttocks, back and triceps).

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Always seek professional advice from an Accredited Exercise Physiologist. Find one here: www.essa.org.au/find-aep