

Physical Therapy and Parkinson Disease

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Fact Sheet

Parkinson Disease

Parkinson Disease (PD) is a progressive neurodegenerative disease that impacts movement. Diagnosis of PD is typically based off common signs and symptoms that often develop before a diagnosis is made. Some examples of common signs and symptoms include:

May develop prior to being diagnosed	May confirm a diagnosis of PD	May develop over time following diagnosis
Loss of smell	Tremors (slight shaking in hands)	Shuffling or “freezing” of feet while walking
Constipation	Muscle stiffness	Loss of balance
Vivid dreams when sleeping	Soft or low voice	Difficulty getting started with movement
Handwriting gets small	Movements are slower	Difficulty getting in and out of bed or up from a chair
Feeling tired	Movements get smaller over time	Difficulty concentrating or remembering

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The most accurate diagnosis and medical management of PD is made by a Neurologist who specialized in Movement Disorders. While there are some ways to manage symptoms of PD through medications or surgical procedures, the most effective way to improve and maintain both symptoms and activity levels is with exercise and physical therapy.

How Can a Physical Therapist (PT) Help?

Physical therapists are movement and exercise specialists who can help people live long, healthy, and productive lives with Parkinson Disease.

It is critical to work with a PT who specializes in Parkinson Disease as soon as the person is diagnosed. Studies have shown that people with PD start to show signs of walking slower and not as far as people without PD even BEFORE they are diagnosed. Prevention strategies and targeted exercises have been shown to improve movements and symptoms at every stage!

The following are just some of the ways that a person with PD can benefit from PT at any stage of the disease.

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Early Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish a baseline of function to track progress and target recommendations as needs change over time • Design an exercise program specific for people with PD that includes aerobic, strength, balance, and stretching exercises • Maximize fitness and mobility! • Provide guidance to access community resources
Middle Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Modify exercises to maintain a high level of intensity • Focus exercises to improve balance and prevent falls • Problem solve mobility difficulties such as getting in and out of bed, getting up from a chair, or freezing • Introduce strategies such as listening to music to make movements easier
Later Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce and help obtain equipment • Provide advice for home modifications if needed • Provide information to caregivers to help with continued exercise, or to learn how to help the person move if needed

Physical therapists are a valuable resource for anyone with Parkinson Disease. Early and consistent access to a PT provided at regular intervals, like a “dental model” of care, can help prevent a decline in mobility and quickly address any problems as they arise.

If you have questions about exercise and PD, or are looking for a PT in your area that specializes in PT, the American Parkinson Disease Association (APDA) partnered with PT researchers at Center for Neurorehabilitation at Boston University have a “helpline” to answer your questions.

Toll Free Number: 888-606-1688 or email rehab@bu.edu