

Spotlight on Parkinson's Disease: Staying Healthy, Keeping Fit

The symptoms of Parkinson's disease (PD) can have an impact on your quality of life. Motor symptoms—tremor, stiffness, slow movements, and difficulty walking—can interfere with your full range of activities of daily living. Nonmotor symptoms, including disturbances in mood, cognition (thinking ability), and sleep, can also take their toll as the disease progresses.

Regular exercise is one of the best ways to reduce the burden of both motor and nonmotor symptoms in PD. Exercise can help maintain mobility and balance, which are especially important for independence and daily function. Every person with PD, no matter what their previous exercise history or current disease symptoms, can benefit from exercise.

How can exercise improve how I live with PD?

The benefits of exercise in PD have become increasingly clear over the past decades. Numerous clinical trials, testing various forms of physical therapy (PT), have shown that people with PD can benefit from many types of regular exercise. People with PD who exercise regularly can maintain or improve their walking ability, balance, strength, flexibility, and heart fitness, compared to those who don't exercise.

Studies reveal that persons with PD who exercise experience less disability and better function compared to those who do not exercise. Given the potential impact of exercise on the brain and its known benefits in reducing disability, the research suggests that exercise should be part of the standard treatment of PD.

What are the barriers to exercise for people with PD?

Many people, whether or not they have PD, may find beginning a regular exercise program daunting. The psychological barrier may be greater for the person

with PD, who may be overly concerned that their symptoms will interfere with activity. The truth is that people with PD, whatever their symptoms, are entirely capable of participating in regular exercise tailored to their needs and interests.

PD symptoms may pose some barriers to certain kinds of exercise. Balance is an especially important factor to consider. For example, impaired balance may make jogging or bicycle riding challenging (although some people—even those with advanced PD—have successfully engaged in these, with supervision and training). Neurogenic orthostatic hypotension (feeling faint when arising) may preclude exercises that involve rapidly standing up. Slowed movements may interfere with rapid games such as ping-pong. Nonetheless, there is a wide range of activities available for people with PD.

Getting Started

There are several important steps to take in order to get started. Every person with PD should see a physical therapist for an initial evaluation to help them plan an exercise program. The physical therapist can help you find the “just right” exercises and level of activity to help you meet your goals. As your disease progresses, you may develop some physical limitations as to what you can do safely, and the physical therapist can help you adjust your exercise program to optimize the benefit.

The most important factor in choosing a type of exercise is a simple one, choose something you enjoy. That choice will help you make exercise part of your daily or weekly routine. Joining a group or an exercise class may benefit some people, especially to help them stay motivated. You may choose to schedule your exercise around your medication so that you are in peak form when you exercise. Have a back-up activity as well so that, for instance, if bad weather keeps you from walking outside, you have exercise options for indoors.

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You may find that an activity tracker, such as those on smartphones or wristbands, helps you keep track of how long you've been working out or how far you have walked.

What types of exercise should I do to keep fit and help improve my PD symptoms?

The best type of exercise is the one that you look forward to doing. For some people that means walking (either over ground or on a treadmill), while for others it may be dancing, yoga, or resistance training. Other possible forms of exercise include swimming, aerobics, stationary bicycling, boxing, strength training, weight lifting, balance/neuromotor training, tai chi, and dancing. You may wish to continue with exercises you enjoyed before your diagnosis, or you may want to try something new.

How much exercise should I do, and how often?

Studies show that the most benefit comes from regular exercise rather than doing exercises sporadically. Studies also show that exercising more than 150 minutes per week (eg, 30 minutes per day, 5 days per week) is associated with better quality of life, greater mobility, better physical function, and better cognition. Keeping at it is the key; the benefits gained can be lost if you stop exercising regularly.

To achieve the greatest impact on your PD symptoms, see a physical therapist, find the right exercise program for you, stick with it, and make it a habit.

What are the other ways of staying healthy and keeping fit for people living with PD?

Exercise is important, but good health also involves good nutrition, getting the right amount of sleep, reducing stress, and paying attention to your mental health including getting treatment for anxiety or depression, both of which are common in people with PD. Your care team can help you with each of these; and regular exercise helps with each as well!

Resources for exercise in PD

If your care team doesn't include a physical therapist or the physical therapist you see doesn't have training in working with people with PD, you can get help finding the right professional in your area by calling the APDA Rehabilitation Resource Center at 888-606-1688 or emailing us at rehab@bu.com. You can speak with a licensed physical therapist about exercise and resources in your area.

The APDA's "Be Active & Beyond" booklet contains information and instructions on stretching and strengthening exercises specific for people with PD. The booklet is available for download at <https://www.apdaparkinson.org/download-exercise-guide>.

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