

Parkinson's disease and exercise

Parkinson's disease is an incurable, progressive neurological condition. The symptoms include tremor, rigidity, slowness of movement and impaired balance. Evidence suggests that regular exercise can improve some of these symptoms and enhance quality of life. This article includes a sample exercise workout, but you should consult closely with your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional when devising your own exercise program.

Benefits of regular exercise

Some of the benefits of regular exercise for the person with Parkinson's disease can include:

- Improved control over gross motor movements, such as walking
- Increased muscle strength and flexibility
- Increased cardiovascular fitness
- Improved coordination and balance
- Improved posture
- Reduced muscle cramping
- Greater confidence in performing daily activities
- Reduced stress levels
- Improved joint mobility.

General recommendations

Consult closely with your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional when devising your exercise program. General recommendations on getting started include:

- Aim for at least 15 minutes of exercise every day.
- Make sure to include a thorough stretching program that targets each joint and muscle group.
- Spend a few minutes warming up and cooling down. This could include marching in place or stretching.
- Start with the easiest exercises first. Slowly introduce the more difficult exercises as your fitness increases.
- Try to perform each movement to the best of your ability.
- Stop and rest if you feel tired at any point during your exercise program, as overexertion can make your symptoms worse.
- Stop doing any exercise that causes you pain.
- If you suffer from fatigue, try exercising earlier in the day.
- Try to make exercising fun. Suggestions include exercising with others or playing your favourite music.

Safety suggestions

If you are at risk of falling or freezing (sudden inability to move), general safety suggestions include:

- Perform your exercises sitting down.
- Hold onto a chair when performing standing exercises.
- Don't perform floor exercises if you can't get up by yourself.
- Only exercise when other people are at home who can help if necessary.
- Exercise with others.
- Ask for assistance from a family member or friend.

Sample exercise program

Be guided by your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional when devising an exercise program. Aim to build up to 8–10 repetitions of each exercise. Ideally, the exercise program should target the following:

- Overall fitness
- Muscle flexibility
- Legs
- Head and shoulders
- Arms and torso
- Face
- Hands and wrists.

Overall fitness

Walking is excellent for overall fitness. Suggestions include:

- Choose flat, obstacle-free terrain.
- Gently stretch your leg muscles before you start walking.
- Taking larger strides may help you balance better.
- Focus on lifting each foot and placing it down heel first.
- Count each step – this can help to make a smoother, more rhythmic walking style.
- If walking isn't practical or possible, explore other options such as water aerobics or stationary cycling.
- Aim to perform aerobic exercise about three times per week.

Muscle flexibility

Stretching suggestions include:

- Hold an easy stretch and don't bounce.
- Maintain the stretch for 30 seconds.
- Repeat each stretch twice.
- If you feel any pain or discomfort, ease off.
- Incorporate gentle stretching into your warm up and cool down routines.

Face

Pull faces at yourself in the mirror. Suggestions include:

- **Surprise** – lift your eyebrows and open your mouth.
- **Displeasure** – frown and purse your lips together.
- **Disgust** – crinkle your nose as if you're smelling something truly awful.
- **Pleasure** – make a big smile.

Head and shoulders

Suggestions include:

- Turn your head slowly from left to right, aiming to glance over each shoulder.
- Lift your face to the ceiling, then drop your chin to your chest.
- Drop your left ear to your left shoulder. Straighten up. Drop your right ear to your right shoulder.
- Raise and lower your shoulders. Roll your shoulders forwards, then backwards.

Arms and torso

Suggestions include:

- Clasp your hands and raise your arms overhead. Lower slowly.
- Put your hands behind your head and open out your elbows.
- To improve your posture – spend time lying flat on your back, preferably without a pillow. If this is too difficult, use the flattest pillow you can tolerate.

Hands and wrists

Suggestions include:

- Touch the tip of each finger to your thumb.
- Rotate your hands so the palms face up, then down.
- Bend your hands at the wrists, up and down.
- Clench and unclench your fists.

Legs

Suggestions include:

- Lie flat on your back, bend one knee, and hug it to your chest. Straighten the leg. Repeat with the other leg.
- Sit down, extend one leg and make a circle with your foot. Repeat on the other side.
- While sitting down, rock your feet from heel to toe, encouraging full ankle movement.
- While sitting down, straighten one leg at a time.
- While sitting down, slowly raise and lower your leg as if stamping your foot in slow motion. Repeat with the other leg.
- Perform stationary marching, lifting each leg as high as you can.
- Lie flat on your back with your knees bent. Lift your buttocks off the bed.

Light weights

Light weights can increase the intensity of your exercise program. You could buy weights that strap with Velcro tape to your wrists and ankles, or use household items such as soup tins or water-filled bottles. Choose a weight that you can push/lift (without pain or fatigue) for an easy 10 repetitions. Only increase the weight once you can comfortably perform three sets of 10 repetitions.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Specialist neurologist
- Physiotherapist
- Movement Disorders Clinic Tel. (03) 9265 1411
- Parkinson's Victoria Inc. Tel. (03) 9581 8700 or 1800 644 189

Things to remember

- Regular exercise can improve some of the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, such as poor balance, rigidity, slowness and impaired movement.
- Be guided by your doctor, physiotherapist or healthcare professional when devising an exercise program.
- Stop and rest if you feel tired at any point during your exercise program, as overexertion can make your symptoms worse.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Parkinson's Victoria

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