Parkinson's disease and constipation
Constipation is a common complication of Parkinson’s disease. You can manage constipation with lifestyle changes such as adding extra fibre to your diet, and medical treatment. See your doctor or talk to a continence professional if the constipation does not resolve within three weeks, despite your best efforts.

Many people who have Parkinson’s disease notice difficulties with constipation before they notice motor symptoms such as tremor or stiffness. Parkinson’s disease is a progressive, degenerative neurological condition that affects the person’s ability to control their body movements. Symptoms of Parkinson’s disease result from the degeneration of nerve cells in the middle area of the brain that make and store dopamine (a brain chemical necessary for smooth, controlled movements). Degeneration of the nerve cells results in lower dopamine levels.

### Symptoms of constipation in Parkinson’s disease

The symptoms of constipation include:

- dry, hard bowel motions ( poo) and difficulty in passing motions
- fewer than three bowel motions a week (on average)
- feeling the need to strain on the toilet
- feeling that the bowel isn’t empty after passing motions.

### Causes of constipation in Parkinson’s disease

The ways in which Parkinson’s disease can increase the risk of constipation include:

- lack of dopamine (a neurotransmitter) in the brain – impairs control of muscle movement throughout the body. Bowel muscles can become slow and rigid
- uncoordinated bowel motions – the bowel muscles may be weak and unable to contract, or they may clench instead of relaxing when trying to pass a motion
- eating problems – dietary fibre containing insoluble fibre adds bulk to your bowel motions and can help prevent constipation. However, if a person with Parkinson’s disease finds it difficult to chew or swallow, they may avoid eating fibrous foods
- drinking problems – you need water to plump up the dietary fibre in your bowel motions. Swallowing difficulties may discourage a person with Parkinson’s disease from drinking enough fluids
- sedentary lifestyle – lack of exercise slows the passage of food through your intestines. Parkinson’s disease reduces muscle control, so lack of exercise is common
- medications – many different medications can cause constipation. Medications used in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease (especially anticholinergic medications, which help to block involuntary movements of the muscles) may slow bowel movements or cause a decrease in appetite.

### Complications of chronic constipation in Parkinson’s disease

Chronic constipation can cause further problems including:

- bowel incontinence (leakage or diarrhoea)
- urinary incontinence (caused by pressure against the bladder)
- urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- lethargy (feeling drowsy, unenergetic or sluggish)
- nausea
- abdominal pain.

### Diagnosis of constipation in Parkinson’s disease

Diagnosis of constipation may include:

- medical history
- detailed description of symptoms
- physical examination.

Medical problems other than Parkinson’s disease can also cause constipation. Your doctor may wish to do tests to rule out other possible causes. The tests depend on the medical condition under investigation.

### Treatment for constipation in Parkinson’s disease

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Your doctor may suggest various treatments to help combat constipation, including:

- dietary changes, including more fibre (for example, wholegrain foods such as cereals, brown rice, pasta and bread, pulses such as lentils and beans, and fruit and vegetables) rather than refined or highly processed foods, and water
- moderate exercise
- good toilet habits
- avoidance of unnecessary medicines that contain substances (such as calcium and aluminium) known to cause constipation
- laxatives, particularly agents that bulk and lubricate the stools
- treatment for any other medical problem that may be contributing to your constipation, such as haemorrhoids (swollen veins in the anus).

**Dietary fibre for constipation in Parkinson’s disease**

Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Choose easy-to-eat fibrous foods such as soft fruits. Consider mashing or pureeing fruits to make them easier to eat. Make sure to include the skin, where most of the fibre is found.
- Eat at least two pieces of fruit and five serves of vegetables every day.
- Eat homemade vegetable soups.
- Sprinkle a tablespoon of bran, psyllium husks or chia seeds on your breakfast cereal or add the bran to baked products such as cakes. However, avoid bran if you have swallowing problems.
- Don’t increase dietary fibre too quickly or you’ll risk bloating and abdominal cramps. If discomfort occurs, cut back your fibre intake, increase your fluid intake, apply a hot water bottle to your abdomen and see your doctor.

**Fluids for constipation in Parkinson's disease**

Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Try to drink six to eight glasses (up to two litres) of fluid every day. Water is best, but you can also include fluid in the form of soup, juice, tea and coffee.
- Limit drinks that cause dehydration such as alcohol, tea and coffee.
- Spread your drinks throughout the day.

**Exercise for constipation in Parkinson’s disease**

Be guided by your doctor, but general suggestions include:

- Talk with your doctor, physiotherapist, exercise physiologist or healthcare professional when planning your exercise program.
- Aim for at least 30 minutes of exercise every day.
- 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.
- Only exercise when other people are at home who can help if necessary.
- Remember: too little exercise and fluid intake with an increase in dietary fibre can worsen constipation for some people.

**Toilet habits and constipation in Parkinson’s disease**

Suggestions for good toilet habits include:

- Go to the toilet as soon as you feel the urge to pass a bowel motion. Hanging on can contribute to constipation.
- Use the correct posture on the toilet to help you pass a bowel motion – place your elbows on your knees, bulge out your stomach, straighten your spine and put your feet on a footstool.
- Avoid holding your breath and don’t strain when you are on the toilet. Allow yourself plenty of time.
- Use a warm washcloth pressed against your back passage or gently massage with one or two fingers to help to relax the muscles.
- Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about medicines to help soften your bowel motions.

**Getting help for constipation in Parkinson’s disease**

See your doctor immediately if:

- constipation develops suddenly
- you have bloody bowel motions
- passing a bowel motion causes pain
- you have unexplained weight loss
- you remain constipated for three weeks.

**Where to get help**

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your neurologist
- Your local continence clinic or service
- Parkinson’s Australia Tel. 1300 644 189
- Independent Living Centres Australia Tel. (03) 9362 6111 or 1300 885 886, TTY (03) 9314 9001
- National Continence Helpline Tel. 1800 33 00 66
- Victorian Continence Resource Centre Tel. (03) 9816 8266 or 1300 220 871
- A dietitian at your local community health centre

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References

- *Parkinson’s Disease and Constipation*, WebMD USA.

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Neuromuscular system

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- Neuromuscular system explained
- Huntington's disease
- Motor neurone disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Spina bifida
- Other movement related conditions

Neuromuscular system explained

- Central nervous system birth defects
  Folic acid taken before conception, and during at least the first four weeks of pregnancy, can prevent around seven out of 10 cases of neural tube defects...
- Neuromuscular disorders
  The combination of the nervous system and muscles is known as the neuromuscular system...

Huntington's disease

- Huntington's disease
  The symptoms of Huntington's disease usually, but not always, first appear when the person is approaching middle age...
- Huntington's disease and diet issues
  Weight loss is often associated with Huntington's disease, but it doesn't appear to be a direct result of diet...

Motor neurone disease

- Motor neurone disease (MND)
  Motor neurone disease (MND) is also called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and Lou Gehrig's disease. MND is a rapidly progressing, neurological disease.
- Motor neurone disease (MND) - help with daily activities
  People with motor neurone disease can keep some independence and quality of life with the right help...
- Motor neurone disease (MND) - independence at home
  A person with motor neurone disease may have difficulty with everyday items in their home...
- Motor neurone disease (MND) - personal care
  Problems using the toilet and bathroom can be stressful for both the person with motor neurone disease and their carer...
- Motor neurone disease (MND) - recreation and leisure
  Recreation and leisure are very important for everyone, especially for people with limited activity...

Multiple sclerosis

- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
  Multiple sclerosis is not contagious, but it is progressive and unpredictable...
- Multiple sclerosis (MS) - common problems
  Common symptoms of multiple sclerosis can be eased with medications, therapies and self-help strategies...

Parkinson's disease

- Parkinson's disease
People with Parkinson's disease can help manage their symptoms through medication and support.

- Parkinson's disease and constipation
  Constipation is a common complication of Parkinson's disease.

- Parkinson's disease and sexual issues
  Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson's disease.

Spina bifida

- Spina bifida
  Folate can prevent up to 70 per cent of spina bifida cases if taken daily for one month before conception and during the first three months of pregnancy.

- Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age.

Other movement related conditions

- Cerebral palsy
  Cerebral palsy affects people in different ways, some people experience minor motor skill problems, while others may be totally physically dependent.

- Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (CMT)
  Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease is the most common inherited disorder affecting the peripheral nervous system.

- Essential tremor
  Essential tremor causes involuntary shaking or trembling of particular parts of the body, usually the head and hands, but it is not Parkinson's disease.

- Friedreich's ataxia
  To the casual observer, a person with Friedreich ataxia may seem to be drunk.

- Helping a child with a disability with everyday activities
  If you have a child with a disability you can help improve their communication and movement by encouraging them to take part in daily activities.

- Kennedy's disease
  Kennedy's disease is a rare inherited neuromuscular disorder that causes progressive weakening and wasting of the muscles, particularly the arms and legs.

- Muscular dystrophy
  People affected by muscular dystrophy have different degrees of independence, mobility and carer needs.

- Myasthenia gravis
  Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness.

- Polio and post-polio syndrome
  Polio is a serious disease that can cause life-threatening paralysis and possibly death.

- Rett syndrome
  People with Rett syndrome have a keen desire to communicate.

- Tourette syndrome
  Milder forms of Tourette syndrome can be misdiagnosed, as it often occurs at the same time as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other disorders.

Related Information

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- Neuromuscular disorders
  The combination of the nervous system and muscles is known as the neuromuscular system.

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Common symptoms of multiple sclerosis can be eased with medications, therapies and self-help strategies...

Motor neurone disease (MND) - personal care

Problems using the toilet and bathroom can be stressful for both the person with motor neurone disease and their carer...

Related information on other websites

- Parkinson Society Canada / Société Parkinson Canada

Support Groups

- Parkinson's Victoria

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