Taming the Tremor: Parkinson’s Disease

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It is devastating to witness a loved one slowly lose that part of them that was in control of their body and mind. Many diseases attack the mind and the body, and movement disorders come in many varieties. When we think of Parkinson’s disease (PD), we picture an older person with a trembling hand, a slow walk and shake in their voice. But it is so much more than that. PD can come at any time of life and will present itself in various ways. Early diagnosis offers the best chance at a longer, healthier and more productive life.

What exactly is Parkinson’s disease?

Parkinson’s disease is one of the movement disorders that attack the central nervous system. It is a neurodegenerative brain disorder that is slow to progress. Many people living with PD live for more than 20 years from the time of their diagnosis. In itself, PD is not fatal, but due to complications resulting from the disease, it is the 14th top cause of death in the United States according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

The human brain normally contains brain cells that produce dopamine, the chemical that relays messages to control movement throughout the body. When 60-80% of those cells are damaged, the motor symptoms of PD emerge. Researchers now believe that other symptoms may come several years before motor symptoms. A loss of smell, sleep disorders, or constipation are just a few of the early detectors and can be overlooked as being associated with many other medical problems. For this reason, researchers are focusing on these early non-motor symptoms in order to look for ways to stop the progression of the disease.

What do I look for?

Though the tremor is the most noticeable of the symptoms, there are many more which can be devastating to a healthy lifestyle. Other signs that you may wish to discuss with your physician to determine the possibility of PD can include:

- rigidity of the arms, legs or trunk
- ‘freezing’ – feeling of being ‘stuck in place’ while walking
- an expressionless gaze
- small, crowded and shaky handwriting
- loss of memory or cognitive understanding
- loss of balance, falling, dizziness or fainting
- muscular pain, tightness, tingling, burning
- urinary problems
- excessive sweating, especially of hands and feet
- fear, depression, irritability, and anxiety
- loss of smell
- low voice volume, muffled speech pattern or hoarse voice
- speech and swallowing problems
- sleep troubles, vivid dreams, acting out dreams, talking or walking while sleeping
- lack of concentration or inability to follow a conversation
- inability to find the words to communicate
- visual-spatial recognition problems
- hallucinations, personality changes, psychosis

No single one of these signs means that you should worry about PD, and not everyone will experience all symptoms. But if you experience any combination of them, it may be cause to seek medical attention.

How can my doctor tell if I have Parkinson’s?

At this time there is no individual test to diagnose PD. Your physician will consider a PD diagnosis when two of the four main motor symptoms are present over a period of time. Also, an assessment of medical history and physical examination, current and past medications, and a neurological exam will take place. Simple tasks will be preformed to show agility, balance, muscle tone, gait and the ability to reason, remember and understand simple instructions.

Medication may be considered at that time to imitate or stimulate the production of dopamine in the body. If a significant improvement is shown with this treatment, a PD diagnosis can then be made clinically.

How can I tame the Tremor?

Sadly, PD has no cure at this time. Research continues on neurodegenerative diseases such as PD, ALS, Alzheimer’s, Huntington’s disease, and Tourette’s syndrome. The typical therapy is to treat the symptoms that are most bothersome to the individual to increase the ability to live a happy and healthy lifestyle for as long as possible.

Working with a care team can provide treatments and assistance specific to the set of symptoms throughout the progression of the disease.
This team may include:
- Neurologist or Movement Disorder Specialist
- Physical and Occupational Therapists
- Nutritionist
- Speech Pathologist
- Social Worker
- Neuropsychologist, Psychiatrists, Psychologists
- In-home care givers
- Spiritual leaders
- And of course, family and friends

Medication that helps to stabilize the dopamine in the brain is the primary treatment. Levadopa is the most effective PD medication. After years, as the disease progresses, the benefits of Levadopa may have a tendency to wear off. The dosage may be adjusted to control these effects or other medications may be added to boost their effectiveness.

More advanced stages of PD may require complex treatment such as a surgical procedure called deep brain stimulation.

Some people may also be helped with the use of various alternative medicines. Supplements, exercise, massage, acupuncture, music or art therapy, pet therapy or yoga have shown to help with relaxation, improved movement and balance, decreased stress, and an improved sense of well-being. Your care team can help you to find appropriate activities for your stage of treatment.

Living with any chronic illness is difficult - for the individual and for those around them. It is normal to feel angry, depressed and discouraged. As normal daily activities become more difficult and time consuming, it is not unusual to become agitated. Family and friends can be your best support, but sometimes it helps to speak to someone who knows what you’re going through. Support groups aren’t for everyone, but they are a way to get some practical knowledge and advice.

“A Parkinson’s diagnosis, although life-altering, is not a death sentence. Symptoms will change over time, as will your attitude; no one should expect... that this will be easy to deal with. But people with Parkinson’s and others alike should all value and make the most of every day. In a best-case scenario, a Parkinson’s diagnosis can become a real wake-up call: a chance to re-examine your priorities, and focus not on what you cannot do, but instead, on what you can.”

- from Michael J Fox Foundation.com

Caring for Loved Ones

Parkinson’s is a life altering event – not only for the patient, but for those who love them and have known them previous to the onset of the disease. At first it’s a curious observation as symptoms appear. Then it becomes a devastating reality as you watch normal activities become impossible tasks. The work begins to find the medication cocktail that works best, the physical therapy and mental exercises that can help in any tiny way, and the hope that someday they’ll find some cure.

But it is essential that you stay positive, vigilant and loving. Ask questions, research therapy options, know what works and what doesn’t and most of all, just be there for them on the hard days and cherish each moment... especially on the good days.

Speak to your physician if you suspect that you or a loved one may be showing signs of Parkinson’s disease.

More information can be found at the National Parkinson Foundation (www.parkinson.org), the American Parkinson Disease Association (www.apdaparkinson.org) and the Michael J Fox Foundation (www.michaeljfox.org). Each organization has up-to-date information on treatments, resources, and research.

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