

MEDICATION MANAGEMENT

Although there is currently no cure for Parkinson's, there are a range of treatments to help manage day-to-day symptoms. The most common treatment is medication.

Parkinson's medication primarily works by:

- increasing dopamine levels in the brain; and
- optimising the brain's use of dopamine.

There are many different medications prescribed for Parkinson's. Everyone's Parkinson's experience is different, so your neurologist or GP will work with you to determine the treatment best suited to you.

It can take time to find what medication works best. Your medications will be reviewed and altered at regular intervals to make sure you continue to receive the best combination as your condition progresses and more symptoms are experienced.

It's also important to let your neurologist know of all medication you take for other health reasons, as some will interact with, or reduce the effect of your Parkinson's medication. Your GP and pharmacist can also advise on this.

TAKE MEDICATION ON TIME

Parkinson's medications help to boost dopamine levels in the brain, but only for a short amount of time. For this reason, effective management of your symptoms is dependent on taking your medication on time, every time.

Medication timers can be useful. Some people use their mobile phones to set alarms to remind them to take medications. Other people use specialised medication timers such as vibrating watches or timed pill boxes.

If swallowing medications has become a challenge, ask your GP to refer you to a speech pathologist to help improve your swallowing. Crushing medication should be avoided.

MAIN PARKINSON'S MEDICATIONS

LEVODOPA

Levodopa is a chemical building-block that your body converts into dopamine. It replaces the dopamine that is lost in Parkinson's and can be used at all stages of the condition.

The uptake of levodopa in the body may be impacted by protein-rich food and fluids, which can make the drug less effective. This is a more important consideration when you've had Parkinson's for some time. Your GP or neurologist can advise you on timing your dose and can refer you to a registered dietician to work out an optimal eating plan.

The main side effect of Levodopa is nausea. You should see a GP if you experience nausea, as some commonly prescribed nausea medications can impact the symptoms of Parkinson's. Many other side effects of levodopa can sometimes be improved by changing your dose, the form of the drug or how often you take it. If this doesn't work, other types of drug may be combined with levodopa. Your neurologist will determine the right treatment for you.

DOPAMINE AGONIST

Dopamine Agonist medications act like dopamine by stimulating your nerve cells to more effectively use the dopamine.

They are used at all stages of Parkinson's. You might take them alone when treatment is being started, or alongside levodopa to help it work better.

Some people taking dopamine agonists may experience problems with impulsive or compulsive behaviour, eg, an increased desire to gamble or engage in sexual activity.

These behaviours often develop slowly, so may not be seen as a problem immediately. Changes to behaviour should be immediately reported to your neurologist or GP as a reduction in dose, or ceasing the medication, will stop the behaviour.

GLUTAMATE ANTAGONIST

The Glutamate Antagonist, Amantadine, can be prescribed to treat Parkinson's symptoms. Exactly how this drug works for Parkinson's isn't fully understood yet, but it may modify levels of certain chemicals in the brain.

It is most likely to be given along with other drug treatments for Parkinson's as it has only a mild effect, helps only a minority of people and its effectiveness may be short-lived.

ANTICHOLINERGICS

Anticholinergics are a type of drug now less commonly prescribed to treat Parkinson's symptoms. They block the action of acetylcholine, a chemical messenger that helps to send messages from your nerves to your muscles.

COMT INHIBITORS

COMT Inhibitors do not help Parkinson's on their own – they have to be used with levodopa. COMT inhibitors reduce Parkinson's symptoms by blocking an enzyme that breaks down levodopa, prolonging its effect.

MAO-B INHIBITORS

MAO-B Inhibitors prevent the breakdown of dopamine in the brain by blocking an enzyme that breaks it down, called monoamine oxidase type B (MAO-B). They are used to make levodopa last longer or reduce the amount required.

MEDICATION SIDE EFFECTS

All prescribed medication can have potential side effects, including those used to treat Parkinson's. Some side-effects of Parkinson's medication includes:

- nausea
- involuntary movements, called dyskinesia
- worsening of constipation
- low blood pressure
- confusion and hallucinations
- behavioural problems, including compulsive behaviour.

Many people find their Parkinson's medication works very well when they start taking it, but this may change over time. Some symptoms you develop may actually be side effects of medication.

Ask your pharmacist for a copy of consumer medical information to understand the potential side effects. Remember, you may not experience them, but it's useful to know about them.

Side effects can usually be managed, so it's important to speak to your neurologist, GP or pharmacist if you notice anything unusual. Do not stop taking your medication without guidance from medical professionals.

For example, if you suddenly stop taking dopamine agonists, this can lead to dopamine agonist withdrawal syndrome, which can cause symptoms such as depression, anxiety or pain.

Any withdrawal from Parkinson's drugs needs to be done in a tapered way, under the supervision of a medical professional.

WEARING OFF

When Parkinson's medication is working well, Parkinson's symptoms will be well-controlled. This is called 'on' time. When symptoms are not well-controlled and don't respond to medication, this is called being 'off'.

As Parkinson's progresses, some people find a dose doesn't last as long as it used to. This is called 'wearing off'. Symptoms will include more noticeable tremor, stiffness, feeling tired, low mood, sweating and anxiety. These are signs your medication needs to be reviewed

Sometimes the effects of wearing off can happen quickly and there will be a sudden change between being 'on' and 'off'. If this occurs, you should see your treating doctor to discuss a medical adjustment.

USEFUL TIPS

- **Keep a diary of symptoms:** This may be helpful to track when symptoms occur so your doctor can work out the most effective timing and dosage.
- **Keep a list of current medications:** Keep an up-to-date list of all medicines you take to show to your GP or pharmacist before stopping or taking any new medications.
- **Inform hospital staff of medication timing:** It's essential that hospital staff understand Parkinson's medication needs to be taken on time, not just at routine drug rounds. Ensure the admitting doctor records the prescribed dose and times on the patient's drug chart. You can also ask to self-medicate to manage your own Parkinson's drugs.

**Information provided by Parkinson's Victoria
providing help for today and hope for tomorrow.**

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