

Medical treatments for Parkinson's disease

This Help Sheet gives a basic outline of the common medical treatments for Parkinson's disease. It explains how medications treat symptoms and help people to live safely and independently.

The information here is only a guide. It is important that people with Parkinson's see a specialist doctor such as a neurologist for expert advice on available treatments and ongoing monitoring of symptoms.

What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease is a condition that affects movement. People with Parkinson's have problems controlling the muscles of the body due to a breakdown of messages from the brain. These problems get worse over time.

We do not know its causes, but people with Parkinson's have low levels of a brain chemical called dopamine. Dopamine helps the brain to control the muscles and move the body smoothly and easily.

The main symptoms include shaking, stiff muscles, slow movement and problems with balance. Parkinson's affects each person differently and symptoms can vary on different days. It may take many years before symptoms start to cause major problems. When they do, many of these symptoms can be managed with treatment and support.

How is Parkinson's treated?

Treatment may not be needed in the very early stages. As the condition progresses, medications can help to control symptoms and allow people to continue to live safely and independently.

Common treatments for Parkinson's

Levodopa is the main treatment for Parkinson's. It works by changing into dopamine in the brain. Levodopa medications contain other drugs – *carbidopa*, *benserazide* or *entacapone* – to help it reach the brain.

** Brand names: Sinemet, Madopar, Stalevo. (Stalevo contains entacapone – see COMT Inhibitors.)*

Dopamine Agonist medications make the cells that use dopamine work more efficiently. They have a longer lasting effect than levodopa and can be used with levodopa to help it to work for longer.

** Brand names: Parlodel, Cabaser, Permax, Apomine, Sifrol.*

MAO Inhibitors, particularly selegeline, reduce the breakdown of dopamine in the brain, allowing lower doses of levodopa to be more effective.

** Brand name: Eldepryl, Selgene.*

COMT Inhibitors, particularly entacapone, help levodopa to reach the brain.

** Brand name: Comtan*

***Note: Brand names change from time to time and substitute or generic brands are also available.**



Side-effects

Taking Parkinson's medication can cause other problems for some people, including:

- Nausea
- Involuntary movements
- Worsening of constipation
- Low blood pressure
- Confusion and hallucinations
- Behavioral problems, such as feeling an uncontrollable need to gamble, have sex or pursue hobbies.

Side-effects can usually be treated. Any problems should be discussed with a doctor.

Managing Parkinson's medication

Each person with Parkinson's has different medication needs and it can take time to find what works best. Some people find the benefits of medication reduce and symptoms return over time. It can help to keep a diary of symptoms and when they occur so that the doctor can work out the most effective timing and dosage. It is important to avoid changing times or doses without talking to the doctor.

Some treatments for other conditions can cause problems for people taking Parkinson's medication. It is a good idea to keep an up to date list of all medicines to show to the doctor or pharmacist before taking any new medicines or stopping any medicines.

When going to hospital it is essential that hospital staff understand that Parkinson's medication needs to be taken at the time prescribed and not just at routine drug rounds. A way to ensure this is to have the admitting doctor record the prescribed dose and times on the patient's drug chart.

Surgery for Parkinson's

Some people with Parkinson's may benefit from surgery, particularly where symptoms are not controlled well enough by medication. Not everyone is suitable for this treatment and surgery is not usually considered in the early stages of the condition.

Tips for people with Parkinson's when visiting their doctor:

- Make a list of points to discuss and take this to your appointment
- Take an up to date list of all your medications
- Be honest about the symptoms you are experiencing
- If you don't understand something, ask the doctor to repeat it or explain it in a different way
- Write down anything important, or ask the doctor to write it down
- Bring a family member or other support person along
- If you speak a language other than English it is very important to have an interpreter present. Ask for an interpreter when booking your appointment. This is usually free of charge.

This Help Sheet provides general information only. Parkinson's Australia does not endorse any particular drug product and all medications should be discussed with a health care professional.

For further information & support contact:

Parkinson's Australia: 1800 644 189

To speak to us in a language other than English:

Phone: **131 450** and ask for an interpreter in your language to connect you to Parkinson's Australia in your state or territory. This is a free service.

This and other help sheets are available in a range of community languages. Contact us or download them from our website.

www.parkinsons.org.au

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