

Nutrition

While there is no “Parkinson’s Diet” as such, the relationship between nutrition, the gut, and Parkinson’s is an emerging area of interest.

Current research is looking into the relationship between the microbiome (normal healthy bacteria in the gut) and the brain. More specifically, researchers are investigating whether there is a link between changes in the microbiome and developing Parkinson’s and whether targeting the microbiome could reduce the risk of Parkinson’s or help treat the condition and its symptoms.

The nutritional issues faced by people living with Parkinson’s can be complex and diverse and can change with progression of the condition. They can also be influenced by the presence of other conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, or swallowing issues. Research suggests that good nutritional status is associated with improved dyskinesia and reduced disease severity, while malnutrition appears to be relatively common among those with Parkinson’s (from 15-45%) and is associated with more significant progression and complications.

Many people with Parkinson’s experience symptoms that can impact their nutritional status, including constipation, loss of sense of smell and taste, fatigue, orthostatic hypotension, energy expenditure through excess movement, changes in appetite, and nausea. This can result in unintentional weight loss, altered medication absorption, and can impact significantly on everyday functioning, as well as quality of life.

This is why people with Parkinson’s are encouraged to eat a healthy, balanced diet to help

maintain healthy weight, prevent constipation, and optimise nutritional benefits. This includes eating a variety of foods from all food groups, including whole grains, breads, cereals, fruits and vegetables, meat, legumes, and dairy products.

Gut health

Parkinson’s can cause slower movement in the gastrointestinal tract and result in constipation, a common symptom that often precedes diagnosis. In people who live with Parkinson’s, studies have shown that dysbiosis of the gut microbiome has been frequently observed. Correctly balancing the types and populations of bacteria in our gut is key in exerting a protective effect on our intestine integrity and mucosal immune system, as well as preventing the growth of harmful bacteria. As diet and diversity of food intake determines which microbes will colonize, flourish, persist, or become extinct, dietary modifications may help to improve gut function and have flow on effects to other symptoms.

While there is no specific diet recommended for those with Parkinson’s, the Mediterranean Diet has the most evidence in supporting brain health and overall functioning. In addition to this, foods that support a balanced microbiome may also be beneficial, which includes a good variety of fresh fruit and vegetables and fermented foods.

In addition to a healthy, well-balanced diet, here are a few other things you can do to manage symptoms and maintain a healthy gut:

- Add some extra fibre (bran, psyllium husks)
- Drink a minimum of 1.5 litres (6 to 8 glasses) of fluid per day, preferably water. Warm liquids

- in the morning can often stimulate bowel movements
- Take an oral aperient, in conjunction with medical or pharmacist advice
 - Exercise regularly
 - Don't skip breakfast
 - Limit your intake of alcohol and those "sometimes" foods that are higher in salt, saturated fat, and added sugar.

Bone health and vitamins

Vitamin D levels, essential for bone health, are often low in many people. For people living with Parkinson's, balance issues can make you susceptible to falls, making bone health important. Ensure you have sufficient bone-strengthening nutrients, such as calcium and Vitamin D. Incorporating weight-bearing exercise, such as walking, can also help maintain bone-strength.

Vitamins B11 and B12 may be impacted by medications; if you notice weight loss, reduced appetite or lower energy levels, see your GP for a review.

Maintaining a healthy weight

Unplanned weight loss can occur with Parkinson's. A dietitian can provide guidance on how to sustain a healthy weight. They may suggest smaller, more frequent meals or assess your suitability for supplements.

If you are having trouble maintaining weight, it is important to discuss this with your neurologist, GP, and dietitian. A dietitian will be able to assess your nutritional status and develop a personalised meal plan and some practical strategies to minimise weight loss. Some useful tips to help maintain optimal body weight include:

- Switch from low-fat or skim dairy products to full-fat dairy products (milk, cheese, yoghurt, custard). This will increase the amount of energy per serving without altering the protein content
- Plan for three main meals and at least three healthy snacks across the day

- Have your favourite snacks readily available and within reach. It's easier to eat the foods that you enjoy rather than foods you dislike
- Consider adding high-energy dense powders or dietary supplements to your meals, as per a dietitian's recommendations
- Try to eat your favourite meals when you are feeling at your best – during "on times"
- Consult an accredited dietitian for personalised advice.

Medication and protein

Protein from the food you eat is transported around your body and across the blood-brain barrier into your brain in the same way that levodopa from your Parkinson's medications is absorbed.

Your body prioritises protein absorption - having food which is high in protein at the same time as your medication may reduce the effect of the medication. When you are recently diagnosed, taking your medication at the same time as meals does not usually have any effect. However, when you have had Parkinson's for several years, taking your medication 30-60 minutes before or 1-2 hours after your meals will ensure you get the most out of your medication.

Iron supplements in particular can reduce the absorption of levodopa. It is recommended to take your iron supplement at least 2 hours before or after your levodopa.

Foods containing protein are important for nutritional health, providing a valuable source of iron, magnesium, calcium, zinc, and Vitamin B12. These foods support the immune system, help the body repair and grow cells, assist in wound-healing, and maintain lean muscle mass.

Protein-rich foods include:

- Meat and poultry
- Eggs
- Legumes, lentils, beans, and nuts
- Cheese, milk, and yoghurt
- Tofu.

For those experiencing other difficulties that can impact on eating, drinking, and preparing meals, like self-feeding and preparing food safely, an occupational therapist can assist with providing aids and supports in this area.

Poor dentition, dry mouth, and swallowing issues can also impact on nutrition and the enjoyment of food. Seek guidance from a dentist and a speech pathologist for support with these issues.

When to seek help from your health team

If you need support, remember that you're not alone. Contact the Fight Parkinson's free and confidential information line for help connecting with an allied health professional. Seek professional guidance for the following concerns:

- If you are worried about medication interacting with your food
- If you need help designing an eating and drinking plan
- If a laxative is required, as some may irritate the gut
- If you encounter changes in your swallowing function
- If you observe unexplained weight loss
- If you experience persistent constipation or dehydration.

Contact Fight Parkinson's

Phone: 1800 931 031 – Open 9am-5pm
Mon-Fri AEST (A free translation service is available on this line.)

Email: info@fightparkinsons.org.au

Visit: Suite 6, Waterman Business Suites,
Level 1, 793 Burke Road, Camberwell 3124

Open Monday – Friday, 9am-5pm

Fight Parkinson's is a leading source of specialised health information and advice services. Through research, education and support, we strive to improve the lives of people living with Parkinson's, PSP, MSA and CBS.

Any medial information provided is for general information purposes only. You should always talk to your treating doctor and qualified healthcare providers for personal medical and health-related instructions.

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