

Living Well With Parkinson's Disease

Introduction

Parkinson's Disease (PD) has a wide variety of symptoms and effects that can impact many aspects of daily life, including communication and nutrition. Living well while coping with PD involves understanding these impacts, and developing strategies to minimize their effects.

PD and Communication

The ability to effectively communicate is critical for professional, social, and familial interactions. Speaking with other people—sharing information, expressing ideas and feelings—is one of the most fundamental and meaningful parts of our daily life. Impaired ability to communicate leads to isolation, can reduce safety, and increases the risk for depression.

The most common and prominent effect of PD on communication ability is a reduction in voice volume. Very often, the person with PD won't be aware of the change, and may become annoyed at constantly being asked to "speak up" by those around him or her. Words may not be articulated fully, so that they sound like mumbling. Speech may speed up, or may sound flat. In addition, the person with PD will often have decreased ability to show facial expressions (masked face), which contributes to loss of nonverbal communication abilities. Cognitive changes, which occur most often later in the disease, may decrease the ability to communicate effectively as well.

Speech Therapy

Speech therapy can go a long way to helping maintain effective communication. Every person with PD and speech impairment can benefit from speech therapy, even before symptoms are prominent. A speech-language pathologist (also sometimes called a speech therapist) can assess the problem and recommend treatment.

For most people, learning techniques to increase voice volume consciously is the most important strategy. It is helpful to speak louder than you think is necessary; let your spouse or friends know that they can help by reminding you to speak louder. Your speech-language pathologist can work with you to develop breathing and articulation exercises, and may recommend technology to aid in communication as well, such as an amplifying microphone.

The Lee Silverman Voice Treatment® is a PD-specific program for improving communication abilities. Many speech-language pathologists who work with PD are trained in this program, or can recommend someone who is trained in the program. The program involves daily sessions over several weeks. It has been shown in clinical trials to be effective for people with PD.

PD and Nutrition

A foundation of good nutrition is essential for health. A balanced diet with sufficient calories and high fiber gives the body what it needs to function at its best at all times.

Over time, PD may affect nutrition in several ways:

- Loss of sense of smell, which is common in PD, reduces the pleasure of food, reducing appetite.
- Impaired chewing and swallowing (dysphagia) may lead to inadequate food consumption and risk of choking or aspiration of food. Dysphagia often develops as the disease progresses.
- PD may cause a slowing of food through the digestive system, reducing appetite as well as interfering with the absorption of medications.
- Constipation is a common symptom in PD, also reducing the desire for food.

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Good Nutrition Advice for PD

Despite these challenges, it is quite possible to eat well and maintain good nutrition in PD. Make sure you eat a balanced diet, including plenty of fruits and vegetables. Not only do fruits and vegetables contain important vitamins and minerals, but they provide the fiber your digestive system needs to prevent constipation. Drink plenty of fluids, as this is also vital to preventing constipation.

A registered dietitian can help you develop a nutritional plan that is tailored to your needs, food preferences, and cooking opportunities. Speak with your physician or other member of your treatment team to obtain a consultation with a dietitian.

As PD progresses, swallowing difficulties may develop. Consult a speech-language pathologist for important exercises and strategies to minimize these difficulties. Swallowing is safer and easier when you chew your food thoroughly, when you consume softer foods, and when you take smaller bites. Eating during your "on" periods (when your medication's effects are strongest) can be safer than during "off" periods.

Medications and Nutrition

Medications that you take by mouth must be absorbed in the gut. Absorption of some medications, including levodopa, are slowed down when they are taken while the digestive system is also digesting a big meal. This delays the absorption of levodopa, and can prevent you from obtaining the full benefit of a dose. Levodopa absorption is specifically inhibited by high-protein meals (including meats of all kinds), especially in advanced disease. Your diet and eating habits may need to be adjusted to reduce this problem. For many people, it is beneficial to wait 30 to 60 minutes after taking a levodopa dose to have a protein-rich meal. Talk to your doctor about further adjustments to your diet to accommodate your medications.

For more information about Living Well with PD please visit the following websites:

- FAQ's about communication and swallowing
<http://www.ncvs.org/research/parkinson3.html>
- Speech and Swallowing in Parkinson's Disease
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2784698/>
- Parkinson's Disease and the Gut
<http://www.pacificneuroscienceinstitute.org/blog/parkinsons-disease/parkinsons-disease-and-the-gut/>

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