

information

CONSTIPATION AND PARKINSON'S

Parkinson's is a progressive neurological condition, which is characterised by both motor (movement) and non-motor symptoms.

Constipation is a common problem for many people with Parkinson's. At first glance, constipation may seem more of a nuisance than a real concern. Constipation adds to the challenge of having Parkinson's and has a negative effect on the person's quality of life.

It is important that you seek help in managing your constipation because the good news is that it can be managed and it should not be allowed to interfere with your enjoyment of life. Discuss it with your GP or phone the National Continence Helpline for advice 1800 33 00 66.

What is Constipation?

Constipation is the infrequent passage of hard, dry bowel motions that are difficult to pass. The myth that you must use your bowels every day is simply not true. There is a wide variation in frequency from three times per day to three times per week.

The normal bowel motion is soft formed and easy to pass and you should feel like you have completely emptied your bowel. If you are straining to empty your bowels or your bowel motion is hard and dry, you may be constipated and you need to take action.

Why is Constipation a Problem for People With Parkinson's?

There are four main ways Parkinson's may cause constipation:

- The muscles of the bowel can be affected, altering how food moves through the bowel
- Medication used to treat Parkinson's can slow down the bowel
- Chewing and swallowing difficulties may affect the ability to eat an adequate diet and drink an adequate amount of fluid
- The muscles used for walking and exercise programs can be affected and decreased levels of adequate exercise can affect bowel activity

Parkinson's can affect the muscles of the bowel, causing slowness and rigidity. The bowel is further robbed of stimulation if your mobility is reduced. This results in the bowel motion (faeces) not being propelled quickly enough through the bowel, which can cause constipation.

Emptying the bowel can be more difficult because of poor coordination of the back passage (anal) muscles. These muscles may contract instead of relaxing, making it difficult to pass the bowel motion completely.

Medicines used to treat Parkinson's may be a factor in constipation – either by directly affecting the bowel by slowing it down, or by affecting appetite.

Chewing and swallowing difficulties can affect you eating sufficient fibre on a daily basis. Fibre is found in fruit, vegetables and grains and is important in keeping the bowel action formed and soft. Drinking sufficient fluid is essential in preventing constipation. You may find this difficult if your swallowing is affected. Talk to your treating doctor if you are experiencing chewing and swallowing difficulties. You may benefit from a referral to a dietician.

For further information contact
your state Parkinson's organisation:
Freecall 1800 644 189 www.parkinsons.org.au

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Constipation Needs to be Treated

Constipation, if left untreated, can lead to several problems. You may feel unwell, lethargic and nauseated, worsening the constipation as you do not feel like eating and drinking adequately. Severe constipation can mimic diarrhoea with loose bowel motions, which is caused by the hard motion irritating the bowel wall. The loose bowel motion can result in bowel incontinence (involuntary leakage from the bowel).

Constipation can also disturb your bladder causing you to pass urine more frequently and more urgently, and may even result in you being incontinent (involuntary leakage of urine). Constipation may make it more difficult for you to empty your bladder and this may result in urinary tract infections.

What You Can do to Prevent and Manage Constipation

There are four simple steps that prevent constipation and the same four steps are key to the management of constipation.

Eat well

Eat a healthy diet rich in dietary fibre. We need at least 30gms of fibre each day. The following is a daily guide to getting enough fibre:

- 2 serves of fruit
- 5-6 serves of vegetables
- 3-6 serves of grain (cereal) foods – use wholemeal or wholegrain breads, high fibre breakfast cereals, brown rice and wholemeal pasta more often than white or refined choices
- Legumes, nuts and seeds are also excellent

It is important to get the right balance between adequate fibre in your diet and drinking sufficient fluid to avoid further problems with constipation.

Drink well

Drink 1.5 – 2 litres (6-8 glasses) of fluid daily unless advised otherwise by your doctor. Limit caffeine, alcohol and sugary drinks as they can cause bladder irritation. Remember that cola, chocolate and some energy drinks are high in caffeine. The best drink is water.

Exercise regularly

Keep moving. Aim to exercise for 30 minutes most days. Walking is a great exercise.

Practice good toilet habits

Go to the toilet when you get the urge to use your bowels, as this is the most effective time to completely empty your bowels. Most people get the urge first thing in the morning or following a meal when eating food has stimulated the bowel

Get into the correct sitting position on the toilet – sit on the toilet, elbows on knees, lean forward and support your feet with a footstool. Relax and bulge out your tummy, relax your back passage and let go – don't hold your breath. When you have finished, firmly draw up your back passage.

If you have tried these four steps for about three weeks and your constipation has not improved, seek help. The following health professionals will be able to offer you advice regarding your next steps:

- Treating Doctor or GP
- Practice Nurse or Community Health Nurse
- The National Continence Helpline 1800 33 00 66

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A Word About Laxatives

Laxatives are medicines that help you pass a bowel motion. Laxatives will make the motion softer and easier to expel, or will increase the motility of the bowel. Laxatives are not the first step in the treatment of constipation but may be necessary if the four steps above do not work. The laxative that best suits you will vary depending upon your degree of mobility, your fluid and fibre intake and your bowel function. Talk to your treating doctor or neurologist before starting any of these medicines.

Seek Help

Constipation is a common problem for people with Parkinson's. It impacts negatively on your quality of life. It should not be dismissed as a trivial problem. Seek help if constipation is an issue for you. It can be cured or better managed. Don't let constipation interfere with your enjoyment of life.

For more information

Speak to your doctor or contact the National Continence Helpline 1800 33 00 66. The Helpline provides free information about bladder and bowel control problems as well as advice about continence products and clinics, and has a wide range of free information and resources available.

The National Continence Helpline is an Australian Government initiative managed by the Continence Foundation of Australia. For further information visit continence.org.au

Where to Get Help and Further Advice

National Continence Helpline: 1800 33 00 66

Continence Foundation of Australia: continence.org.au

Parkinson's Australia: parkinsons.org.au

Bladder and Bowel website: bladderbowel.gov.au

Public Toilet Map: toiletmap.gov.au

Continence Foundation of Australia

National Office

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The Continence Foundation is the Australian peak body for awareness, education and advocacy for those with incontinence and their carers.



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