



Understanding Parkinson's

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Parkinson's is a progressive, neurological condition for which currently there is no cure. There are around 127,000 people with Parkinson's in the UK and this number is set to rise to 162,000 by around 2020 (Source: Parkinson's UK). Approximately 10,000 people are diagnosed each year and, although Parkinson's is often seen as a condition that only affects older people, around one in 20 will be under the age of 40 at the time of their diagnosis.

Parkinson's is caused by a lack of a chemical in the brain called dopamine. Dopamine allows messages to be sent to the parts of the brain that coordinate movement. With the loss of the dopamine producing cells, which start to die in Parkinson's, these parts of the brain are unable to work normally, causing the symptoms of Parkinson's to appear. The level of dopamine then continues to fall slowly over many years and this causes the existing symptoms to further develop and new symptoms to appear.

Parkinson's can affect everyday activities such as talking,

walking, swallowing and writing. Medication is the main treatment for the condition but this can only treat the symptoms of Parkinson's and not the condition itself. Symptoms of Parkinson's can include tremor, slowness of movement and muscle stiffness. Tremor is the symptom most commonly associated with Parkinson's but, contrary to popular belief, only around 70% of people with the condition experience this. Other, less visible, symptoms may include sleep difficulties, depression, anxiety and memory loss. These are often the symptoms that people with Parkinson's find the most debilitating.

Parkinson's is a fluctuating condition - meaning that a person's symptoms can vary and change at any time. Symptoms can vary from day to day and even from hour to hour. On top of any physical symptoms they may have, many people with Parkinson's experience frustration and isolation about their condition and the loss of the skills and ability to do the everyday things that most of us take for granted.

Many people with Parkinson's do carry on working following their diagnosis, however it can depend on the type of job they do and how the condition affects them. For example some people's symptoms may progress much quicker than others or they may respond better to drug treatments. An assessment by an occupational therapist may be able to help with any practical problems at work and offer advice on how to make improvements to the working environment to make it easier for people with Parkinson's to carry on working.

If you are diagnosed with Parkinson's, you are under no obligation to tell your employer but some people do find it helpful or necessary to do so. They may be able to provide some support and help with making amendments to your job or working environment. Many people with Parkinson's have found their employers to be very supportive and allowed them to make changes, such as flexible working hours or working from home.

There is a large network of medical professionals available to support people with Parkinson's and their families and carers. Every person with Parkinson's should have access to a specialist neurologist or geriatrician, who should manage their treatment programme and help them access other services like occupational therapy, speech and language therapy and dietetic services. These professionals will also be able to offer some advice on work and home life with Parkinson's.

There are also around 300 specialist Parkinson's nurses in the UK, although not every area in the country has access to one. They can provide support and advice for people with Parkinson's and their families and carers, as well as being able to help with issues such as changes in medication.

Parkinson's UK has a team of 14 Education and Training Officers covering the whole of the UK. They specialise in delivering high-quality training for health

and social care professionals to help them enhance their understanding of Parkinson's and there help their patients with Parkinson's to maintain independence and good health for as long as possible.

The courses provide a comprehensive introduction to Parkinson's, related symptoms, medication side effects and highlights the support and resources available to people with Parkinson's and their carers as well as the support available for professionals.

The charity also provides a wealth in information and support via its website and confidential helpline. This includes information and resources for people living with Parkinson's, as well as for health and social care professionals and anyone else who needs advice on Parkinson's.

For more information about Parkinson's and Parkinson's UK, visit www.parkinsons.org.uk or call our free, confidential helpline on 0808 800 0303.



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