

## Ten Frequently-Asked Questions about Parkinson's Disease

### 1 What is Parkinson's disease?

Parkinson's disease (PD) belongs to a group of conditions called movement disorders. It is both chronic and progressive, meaning its symptoms grow worse and last over time. Some of the common symptoms of Parkinson's are tremor of the hands, arms, legs or jaw; rigidity or stiffness of the limbs and trunk; bradykinesia or slowness of movement; and postural instability or impaired balance and coordination.

### 2 How many people have PD?

As many as one million Americans live with Parkinson's disease, which is more than the combined number of people diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy and Lou Gehrig's disease. Approximately 60,000 Americans are diagnosed with Parkinson's disease each year, and this number does not reflect the thousands of cases that go undetected. Incidence of Parkinson's increases with age, but an estimated four percent of people with PD are diagnosed before the age of 50.

### 3 What causes PD?

As is the case with many neurological disorders, the cause of Parkinson's disease is not known. However, scientists and researchers are working diligently to uncover the possible cause(s), including genetics and environmental factors, of Parkinson's disease.

### 4 Is PD inherited?

Although the vast majority of Parkinson's cases are not directly inherited, researchers have discovered several genes that can cause the disease in a small number of families. Research on these rare genetic forms is contributing greatly to advancing the understanding of all forms of Parkinson's. However, for most people with Parkinson's disease, we do not yet know how having a family member with PD affects someone's chances of developing the disease.

### 5 What happens in PD?

Parkinson's disease occurs when a group of cells, in an area of the brain called the substantia nigra, begin to malfunction and eventually die. These cells produce a chemical called dopamine, which is a neurotransmitter, or chemical messenger, that regulates the activity of parts of the brain that control movement initiation and coordination. When Parkinson's occurs, these cells begin to die at a faster rate and the amount of dopamine produced in the brain decreases, leaving a person unable to control movement normally.

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## 6 How is PD diagnosed?

There is no standard test to conclusively show if a person has Parkinson's disease. Because of this, it can often be difficult to diagnose. However, a skilled neurologist is able to accurately diagnose PD. Physicians rely on a neurological examination and the patient's descriptions of symptoms to determine whether he or she has Parkinson's. A neurologist may order several tests to rule out other conditions before diagnosing a person with Parkinson's disease.

## 7 How do you treat PD?

There is currently no known cure for Parkinson's. Physicians treat PD with medications that treat the symptoms of the disease. Levodopa is the most widely prescribed Parkinson's medication, and people often take several other medications to manage the disease. Surgical options, such as deep brain stimulation, may help alleviate a person's PD symptoms if and when they stop responding favorably to medication. However, surgery is only effective for a small group of people with Parkinson's and is only recommended if a patient meets specific criteria.

## 8 Can people die from PD?

Parkinson's disease is a progressive disorder, and although it is not considered to be a fatal disease, symptoms do worsen over time and make life difficult. People with Parkinson's experience a significantly decreased quality of life and are often unable to perform daily movement functions, such as getting out of bed unaided and driving. Most individuals are eventually forced to stop working due to the unavoidable progression of disabling symptoms. In some cases, people have died from Parkinson's-related complications, such as pneumonia.

## 9 What is the cost of PD?

The amount of money that the United States and individuals spend each year on Parkinson's disease is staggering. The combined direct and indirect cost of Parkinson's, including treatment, social security payments and lost income from inability to work, is estimated to be nearly \$25 billion per year in the United States alone. Medication costs for an individual person with PD average \$2,500 a year, and therapeutic surgery can cost up to \$100,000 dollars per patient.

## 10 What can be done to find a cure for PD?

Over the last decade, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) have devoted significant resources to making substantial advances in neurosciences, in lab and animal studies as well as clinical trials. However, a potential crisis in Parkinson's clinical research is looming because the number of people volunteering to participate in clinical trials is not keeping up with the growth in available trials. To find out about clinical trials and how to participate, please visit [www.PDtrials.org](http://www.PDtrials.org), a website created by the *PDtrials* coalition to provide a listing of Parkinson's clinical trials that are open for enrollment.

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