

# Parkinsonism

**P**arkinsonism is an umbrella term used to cover a range of conditions. These conditions share the main symptoms of slow movement, possible tremor, rigidity and problems with walking.

**This information sheet names the different forms of parkinsonism and explains how parkinsonism is diagnosed. It looks at the methods your specialist may use to work out which form of parkinsonism you have.**

## **What are the different forms of parkinsonism?**

Most people with a form of parkinsonism have idiopathic Parkinson's disease (IPD), also known as Parkinson's. Idiopathic means that the cause is unknown.

People showing symptoms of parkinsonism who are not diagnosed with idiopathic Parkinson's may have another type of parkinsonism.

Forms of parkinsonism that are currently recognised, other than Parkinson's, include:

**Benign tremor conditions, including benign essential tremor (BET), dystonic tremor, indeterminate tremor and atypical tremor**

You may be diagnosed with this if tremor is your main symptom and it is different from a Parkinson's tremor.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet *Tremor and Parkinson's*.

## **Multiple system atrophy (MSA)**

Both multiple system atrophy and Parkinson's cause stiffness and slowness in the early stages. But the additional problems, such as difficulty with swallowing and dizziness that develop in multiple system atrophy, are unusual in early Parkinson's. The condition used to be known as striatonigral degeneration, Shy Drager syndrome, or olivopontocerebellar atrophy.

## Progressive supranuclear palsy (PSP)

Progressive supranuclear palsy is sometimes called Steele–Richardson–Olszewski syndrome. It affects eye movement, balance, mobility, speech and swallowing.

## Vascular or arteriosclerotic parkinsonism

Sometimes, people who have had a stroke, often one so mild that they didn't notice it, may experience this form of parkinsonism.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet *Vascular parkinsonism*.

## Drug-induced parkinsonism

Some drugs can cause a form of parkinsonism, which is usually reversible.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet *Drug-induced parkinsonism*.

There are several other, much rarer, possible causes of parkinsonism.

There are also some other conditions that have symptoms similar to those seen in parkinsonism. Your specialist may wish to rule out rare conditions such as benign tumours and Wilson's disease, an inherited condition where there is too much copper in the body's tissues.

## How is parkinsonism diagnosed?

You should be referred to a specialist for diagnosis. They will look at your medical history and carry out a medical examination.

## Investigating symptoms

Specialists who see a lot of people with parkinsonism may notice unusual symptoms that lead them to diagnose a form of parkinsonism that isn't Parkinson's. But differentiating between types of parkinsonism isn't always easy, because:

- the first symptoms of the different forms of parkinsonism are so similar
- everyone with parkinsonism is different and has different symptoms

- in many cases, parkinsonism develops gradually. Symptoms that allow your doctor to make a more specific diagnosis may only appear as your condition progresses

## Response to Parkinson's drugs

If your specialist thinks you have Parkinson's, they will expect you to have a good response to Parkinson's drugs, such as levodopa (Madopar®, Sinemet® or Duodopa®). A good response means that your symptoms will improve, as long as a large enough dose is given that lasts for a long enough time. Sometimes, it will only be clear that you've responded to medication when the drug is reduced or stopped, and your symptoms become more obvious again. If you don't have any response to Parkinson's medication, it will cast doubt on your diagnosis.

Most people with forms of parkinsonism other than Parkinson's usually don't respond, or respond less well, to Parkinson's drugs. But to confuse matters, some people with forms of parkinsonism other than Parkinson's will show a good response.

If you have both unusual symptoms and no response to Parkinson's drugs, this doesn't automatically mean you have another form of parkinsonism. But it will make your specialist want to investigate further.

In this case, your specialist may use the terms 'atypical parkinsonism' or 'Parkinson's plus'. These terms are not a diagnosis, but they simply mean that you probably have something other than Parkinson's.

## Specialist tests

Although they are not routinely available, there are specific tests that your specialist may wish to pursue. None of these tests alone can make a definite diagnosis, but sometimes they can rule out a particular condition. Sometimes (used alone or combined with other tests) they can help strengthen a case for a particular diagnosis, but only when put together with your medical history and the results from your medical examination.

Current tests available include:

- MRI brain scanning
- an electrical recording (EMG) of the urethral or anal sphincter. This test checks the health of the muscles and the nerves that control them
- special recordings of pulse and blood pressure, known as autonomic function tests (AFTs). Dizzy spells and low blood pressure can be a sign of multiple system atrophy
- a dopamine transporter chemical scan, known as a Dat Spect Scan or DaTSCAN, or an FP-CIT scan

**Find out more:** to read more about DaTSCAN, see our [information sheet \*Scans and Parkinson's\*](#).

## More information and support

It can be unsettling if you think you have Parkinson's, but are then told you may not have this condition. You may feel like you're in limbo while waiting for the new diagnosis, but there are people who can help.

### Parkinson's nurses

Parkinson's nurses provide expert advice and support to people with parkinsonism conditions and those who care for them. They can also act as a liaison between other health and social care professionals to make sure your needs are met.

Parkinson's nurses may not be available in every area, but your GP or specialist can give you more details on local services.

### Parkinson's UK

We offer information and support to people with all forms of parkinsonism.

### Information and support workers

Our information and support workers provide advice and information for anyone affected by parkinsonism. They can also provide links to local services.

For details of the local information and support worker in your area, contact our helpline on **0808 800 0303** or email

**hello@parkinsons.org.uk**. You can also find out more on our website at **parkinsons.org.uk/isw**

### Our helpline

You can also call our free confidential helpline for general support and information. Call **0808 800 0303** (calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks) or email **hello@parkinsons.org.uk**

### Local groups

You can speak to others who may have been in a similar situation at your Parkinson's UK local group. Visit **parkinsons.org.uk/localtoyou** or call our helpline for details of your nearest meeting.

### Online forum

Speak to others in a similar situation through our online discussion forum at **parkinsons.org.uk/forum**

If you have been diagnosed with a benign tremor condition, multiple system atrophy or progressive supranuclear palsy, these organisations can also offer more specific support:

Benign essential tremor and other conditions featuring tremor:

### The National Tremor Foundation

**01708 386399**  
**enquiries@tremor.org.uk**  
**www.tremor.org.uk**

Multiple system atrophy:

### The Multiple System Atrophy Trust

**020 7940 4666**  
(Monday–Friday, 9.30am–4.30pm)  
**office@msatrust.org.uk**  
**www.msatrust.org.uk**

Progressive supranuclear palsy:

### The PSP Association

**01327 322410**  
**psp@pspeur.org**  
**www.pspeur.org**

## Thank you

Thank you very much to everyone who contributed to or reviewed this information sheet:

**Nin Bajaj, Consultant Neurologist, Nottingham University hospitals**

**Zenita Cowen, Parkinson's Disease Nurse Specialist, The James Cook University Hospital, Middlesbrough**

Thanks also to our information review group and other people affected by Parkinson's who provided feedback.



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## Parkinsonism

If you have comments or suggestions about this information sheet, we'd love to hear from you. This will help us ensure that we are providing as good a service as possible.

We'd be very grateful if you could complete this form and return it to [Information Resources, Parkinson's UK, 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 1EJ](#). Or you can email us at [publications@parkinsons.org.uk](mailto:publications@parkinsons.org.uk). Thanks!

### Please tick...

- I have Parkinson's/parkinsonism. When were you diagnosed? .....
- I'm family/a friend/a carer of someone with Parkinson's
- I'm a professional working with people with Parkinson's

Where did you get this information sheet from?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse | <input type="checkbox"/> Information and support worker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parkinson's UK local group or event | <input type="checkbox"/> Ordered from us directly       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Our website                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other .....                    |

We're the Parkinson's support and research charity. Help us find a cure and improve life for everyone affected by Parkinson's.

### Can you help?

At Parkinson's UK, we are totally dependent on donations from individuals and organisations to fund the work that we do. There are many ways that you can help us to support people with Parkinson's. If you would like to get involved, please contact our Supporter Services team on **020 7932 1303** or visit our website at **parkinsons.org.uk/support**. Thank you.

### Parkinson's UK

Free\* confidential helpline **0808 800 0303**

Monday to Friday 9am–8pm, Saturday 10am–2pm. Interpreting available.

Text Relay **18001 0808 800 0303**

(for textphone users only)

**hello@parkinsons.org.uk**

**parkinsons.org.uk**

\*calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks.

### How to order our resources

**01473 212115**

**resources@parkinsons.org.uk**

**parkinsons.org.uk/publications**

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts. We hope that these will add to any professional advice you receive and will help you to make any decisions you may face. Please do continue to talk to your health and social care team if you are worried about any aspect of living with parkinsonism.

References for this information sheet can be found in the Microsoft Word version at **parkinsons.org.uk/publications**

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Have you found the publication easy to read/use?  Yes  No

What aspects did you find most helpful? .....

Were you looking for any information that wasn't covered? .....

Do you have any other comments? .....

If you would like to become a member of Parkinson's UK, or are interested in joining our Information Review Group, please complete the details below and we'll be in touch.

Membership  Information Review Group (who give us feedback on new and updated resources)

Name .....

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