

Dental and oral health in Parkinson's

This information sheet explains the difficulties you may experience with dental health when you have Parkinson's. It also looks at why they happen and what can be done to help.

Why is it important to look after my teeth and mouth?

Oral health contributes to your overall health. A healthy mouth will help you to chew, taste, swallow and speak properly. It means you can choose the foods you like to eat, rather than being limited to foods your teeth allow you to eat.

Looking after your oral health will also help you adapt to dentures if you need them and gives protection from overall infection.

There are three basic rules you need to follow to help you keep up your dental and oral health:

- maintain a healthy diet
- clean your teeth well
- visit your dentist regularly (and tell them you have Parkinson's)

What oral and dental problems may I experience because I have Parkinson's?

Having Parkinson's doesn't necessarily mean that you will have problems with your dental health. Most people have dental problems as a result of poor diet and bad oral hygiene.

But the nature of Parkinson's, and some of the medication used to treat the condition, may mean

“When it comes to dental health, I don't do anything special, but I do use an electric toothbrush. They can be more expensive than a manual brush, but the handle is usually slightly bigger, so it's easier to grip. Also the rotating bristles make it easier to clean my teeth properly.”

Kris, diagnosed in 2004

that you will experience some problems that are usually uncommon. Parkinson's symptoms can also make cleaning your teeth more difficult.

The main dental problems you may experience are:

- difficulty in swallowing
- dry mouth
- increase in tooth decay
- drooling
- difficulty in controlling dentures (if you have them)

Swallowing problems

Dysphagia is the medical term for difficulty in swallowing. Parkinson's can cause the muscles in your jaw and face to weaken, which affects the control you have over chewing and swallowing. The weakened muscles may also reduce the tightness that you have when closing your lips. If you can't close your lips tightly, this will make it difficult to swallow.

In rare cases, ill-fitting dentures or broken fillings may interfere with swallowing. If this is the case, your dentist may be able to help fix the problem.

A speech and language therapist may be able to help you if swallowing is a problem. They will come up with a management plan to suit your needs. This may include exercises to strengthen your lips, tongue and throat, and changes to your diet to include foods and liquids that are easier and safer to swallow.

Find out more: see our information sheet [Eating, swallowing and saliva control in Parkinson's](#).

Contact your specialist, GP or Parkinson's nurse (if you have one) for a referral to a speech and language therapist. You can also contact your local Parkinson's UK information and support worker to find out details of speech and language therapy services in your area. You can find their contact details at parkinsons.org.uk/isw or by calling our helpline on **0808 800 0303**.

Find out more: see our information sheet [Speech and language therapy and Parkinson's](#).

Dry mouth

Medication prescribed for Parkinson's can sometimes cause a reduction in the flow of saliva to your mouth.

Saliva is more than just a lubricant. It contains antibodies that help fight against general illness. It also contains enzymes, which aid digestion.

A dry mouth can lead to increased rates of tooth decay and gum disease. It may also cause dentures to become loose and difficult to control. Some people may experience a burning sensation because of a dry mouth. You may also experience a reduction in or loss of taste. A dry mouth can increase the harmful effects of sugar on teeth, making it more important to watch what you eat and when you eat.

Tell your dentist that you have a dry mouth. They may ask you what drugs you take, so you may find it helps to take a list of your medication with you.

You should also mention having a dry mouth to your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse because there may be an alternative treatment that doesn't cause this problem. Saliva substitutes are also available. Your GP, dentist or local pharmacist will be able to advise you about this.

The following tips may help reduce dry mouth.

Do:

- think about changing your diet. A dietitian will be able to help you

Find out more: see our booklet [Parkinson's and diet](#).

- try to take frequent sips of water
- use lip salve or vaseline to keep your lips moist
- remove dentures at night to give your mouth a chance to recover

Don't :

- smoke – it makes the dryness worse
- use mouthwashes that are not prescribed by your dentist or doctor because many contain alcohol, which can increase dryness
- suck sweets to increase saliva – this will increase decay and other oral problems
- sip drinks containing sugar between meals. This will also increase decay and other oral problems

Increase in tooth decay

Sugar forms an acid which attacks the teeth leading to cavities and tooth decay. How often sugar is in contact with your teeth is more damaging than the amount of sugar you eat. To stop tooth decay from happening you can try the following:

- Try to have no more than four meals a day containing sugar.
- Snacks between meals should be sugar free eg, cheese or vegetables.
- Drinks containing sugar should be restricted to meal times. Between meals water or sugar free tea or coffee is preferable.
- Use a fluoride toothpaste and brush your teeth twice a day. Your dentist may prescribe a highly concentrated fluoride toothpaste for you. After spitting your toothpaste out, don't rinse your mouth and avoid having anything to eat or drink for 30 minutes afterwards.
- Your dentist may also advise a fluoride mouth rinse to use at times other than when brushing. This is important if you have a dry mouth as you are more likely to get tooth decay.

Drooling

When you have Parkinson's, the natural tendency to swallow slows down. We all swallow many times a day, but the rigidity and slowing down of movement that people with Parkinson's experience may reduce this.

If you swallow less, saliva can pool in your mouth and instead of being swallowed, it can overflow from the corners of your mouth. This may happen when you're concentrating on other things, such as watching TV or doing daily chores.

Some people with Parkinson's can have a stooped, head-down posture and may find it hard to seal their lips. This can make it harder to control saliva flowing from the mouth.

If you have problems with drooling or dribbling this may lead to sores and cracks developing at the corners of your mouth. This can make some everyday activities, such as talking, eating meals or having a drink, difficult. It can also lead to problems with your teeth and infections in your mouth.

There are several things you can try to help manage drooling.

Find out more: see our [information sheet Eating, swallowing and saliva control in Parkinson's](#).

If you have dentures, ask your dentist to examine them and advise on the best way to improve control. A denture adhesive may help, but you should be aware that an adhesive can sometimes mask the problem of drooling for a long time. This makes a more permanent solution difficult. There are various techniques your dentist may use to minimise problems, so get advice as early as possible.

Controlling dentures

Some people with Parkinson's may have difficulty controlling their dentures because of the following:

- problems in controlling facial muscles
- loss of muscle tone
- dry mouth
- pooling of saliva
- poorly designed dentures
- old and very worn dentures
- loose dentures that rub parts of the mouth and cause blisters or ulcers. They may also make it difficult to eat and can make speech worse

How can my diet help to reduce dental problems?

A well-balanced diet is essential for your overall health and for the health of your teeth and gums. A dietitian can offer more specific advice but, in general, you should try to cut down on the number of times that you eat sugar or sugary foods a day.

Try and reduce your food and snack intake to only six times a day. This covers four meals and two snacks. For example, if you like to suck mints or chew sweets, then having one after an interval of 15–30 minutes counts as two separate intakes of food. This also applies to sugary drinks and biscuits. This should help you to cut down on the number of times that you eat sugar or sugary foods a day as sugar can damage your teeth.

How often should I visit my dentist?

It is important to make sure that any dental problems you may have are dealt with in their early stages. Regular visits to a dentist will help identify and treat any problems quickly, and prevent them getting worse. How often you should visit your dentist will depend on your individual needs. Your dentist should be able to advise you on how often you need to have a dental check up.

Tell your dentist that you have Parkinson's and how it can affect you. For example, let them know if you have mobility problems that can make it difficult for you to clean your teeth properly. You may also find it helpful to tell your dentist if you think you may have physical difficulties during your appointments because of your symptoms.

Ask your dentist for advice on cleaning techniques or aids and what kind of toothbrush may be best for you to use. A dentist can also advise you on other ways of preventing infections from developing in the mouth.

If you are unable to attend the surgery, ask if home visits are possible. Many dentists will do this, but if you experience difficulty, contact your local Community Dental Clinic or NHS Direct. They may be able to advise you further.

“ I think that when it comes to dental health, it's very important to have a dentist who understands Parkinson's. ”
Kay, whose husband has Parkinson's

Tips for people with natural teeth

It is important to clean all tooth surfaces, especially there area where the tooth leaves the gum.

You can use whatever technique you find easiest. Don't forget to clean both sides of your teeth as well as the biting surface. Your dentist or hygienist may show you some aids to help you clean between your teeth.

If you find cleaning your teeth difficult or tiring, you could consider cleaning one part of your mouth in the morning and another part in the afternoon.

If you have a carer who cleans your teeth, they may find it easier to stand behind you when brushing your teeth. Dentists will always clean your teeth from behind.

If your carer is right-handed, it may be easier to clean your left side teeth from behind and your right side teeth while standing in front of you. You may find it helpful to use a toothbrush that has an angled head. Electric or battery-operated toothbrushes can make brushing easier. There are also three-sided tooth brushes available. Ask your dentist for advice about what type of toothbrush would be best for you.

Tips for people with dentures

If you have dentures, removing them will help you clean all surfaces more easily.

Plaque can build up on dentures as well as natural teeth, causing irritation to the skin on the roof of your mouth, cheeks and gums. This plaque can cause damage that may make your dentures become loose overtime. This may not cause you pain, so you may not notice it until you need treatment.

It may help you to do the following:

- Never use toothpaste on dentures because it's too abrasive – similar to cleaning plastic with a

brillo pad. Denture pastes are available to clean your dentures.

- Always clean dentures over a sink full of water. This will help avoid breaking them if you drop them accidentally.
- Cleaning your dentures with a nailbrush and soap and water has been shown to be as effective as using commercial denture pastes or soaking solutions.
- If you use a soaking solution for cleaning your dentures, follow the instructions carefully. Leaving dentures in the solution for too long can damage the plastic. Also make sure that the solution is not too hot, as heat can damage the denture plastic. Avoid using a soaking solution if you have metal dentures.
- Do not use bleach
- If you find persistent stains, ask your dentist to remove them. It is vital that you get advice from a doctor or dentist about any specific problems.

If you have any problems in getting advice on these or any other dental issues, you can contact your local Community Dental Clinic. You will find their address in the Yellow Pages, or you can contact your local primary care trust or health board.

More information and support

Parkinson's nurses

Parkinson's nurses provide expert advice and support to people with Parkinson's 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.

Information and support workers

Our information and support workers provide advice and information for anyone affected by Parkinson's. 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

Support is available through Parkinson's UK local groups. Visit parkinsons.org.uk/localgroups 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

The British Society of Disability and Oral Health

www.bsdh.org.uk

The British Society of Gerodontology

www.gerodontology.com
contact@gerodontology.com

British Dental Association

020 7935 0875
www.bda.org
enquiries@bda.org

Thank you to everyone who contributed to and reviewed this information sheet:

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



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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. Thanks!

Please tick...

- I have Parkinson's. 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 information. We hope that this 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 Parkinson's.

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

Last updated November 2011. Next update available November 2013. FS98

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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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