



Parkinson's  
Disease Society

## Computers, the Internet and Useful Websites

Computers can be very valuable for people with Parkinson's disease. For people with handwriting difficulties computers can make dealing with correspondence much easier, by enabling them to type letters and send emails. See the Parkinson's Disease Society (PDS) information sheet *Handwriting*.

For people with limited mobility, email and the internet make accessible groups and services, such as shopping online, that they might otherwise find difficult to access. The internet is an excellent source of information, thanks to the countless websites available (although not all contain reliable information).

However, access to computer technology can sometimes be difficult for people with Parkinson's and can be further complicated by the onset of other difficulties, such as arthritis or impaired vision.

The PDS receives a large number of enquiries about how to make computers and the internet easier and more accessible for people with Parkinson's. We are also asked for details of Parkinson's websites and mailing lists.

The first part of this information sheet provides general information on computers and accessibility, tips on using them and sources of additional help. The second part discusses some of the more useful Parkinson's resources available from the internet and by email.

### Computers and accessibility

The information we can provide can only be very general. For more specific advice, we recommend that you seek expert advice before purchasing any computer equipment

or making any adaptations. This is because Parkinson's is such an individual condition and, also, personal needs vary enormously.

One of the key sources of advice on computers for people with disabilities is an organisation called AbilityNet (details follow).

An occupational therapist may also be able to advise you. See the PDS information sheet *Occupational Therapy and Parkinson's* for more information about what they do.

### AbilityNet

AbilityNet is a charitable organisation whose intention is to make computer technology accessible to people with disabilities. It has a free advice and information service that you can phone on 0800 269545 (free phone) or email [enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk)

There are centres in Bristol, Cambridge, Edinburgh, Liverpool, London, Reading, Warwick, Weybridge and York and a comprehensive website: [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

This includes step-by-step guides to making your computer easier to use, with sections on help with seeing the screen, help with using your keyboard and mouse, and help with language and reading: [www.abilitynet.org.uk/myway/](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/myway/)

Other services include:

- individual assessment of a person's needs, either at any one of the centres, or at home after a telephone conversation
- adapted computer equipment with full training and technical support – you may have to pay some costs if you need particular software or adaptations



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- a programme of awareness education for employers and other people working with people with disabilities
- a consultancy service for employers with disabled staff

## **Accessibility**

Some people find that they have difficulty with accessing the programs and facilities a computer can offer. Often, with only a few minor adjustments, people with Parkinson's can use a computer to its full advantage. Even simple adjustments to a person's posture, the height of a chair, or the person's distance from the keyboard or monitor can significantly increase a computer's accessibility for people with Parkinson's. An occupational therapist should be able to advise further on this.

## **Keyboards**

Keyboards make writing simpler. Typing skills are not necessary for a computer, as most functions can be carried out with one finger. However, for people with Parkinson's, the arrangement of the keyboard can prove difficult. With all the keys arranged in straight rows, moving around a keyboard requires a great deal of motor control. Keys can be quite sensitive. For example, a person may find that a character is being typed repeatedly, because they are pressing on the key for longer than is required. Also, many operations require two or more keys to be pressed simultaneously.

Some solutions are available for relatively little cost. For example, the keyboard can be 'tuned' so that it is less sensitive to pressure, allowing a person to dwell for longer on a keystroke than might otherwise be allowed.

A keyguard can be useful. This is a rigid plate with holes that fit over the keyboard. The holes are positioned over each key and they make it impossible to press two keys at once. As a further benefit, it is possible to rest hands and arms on the guard without pressing keys.

Keyboards are also available in models other than the commonly seen rectangular arrangement of straight lines, and many have been designed for greater comfort for the user.

## **The mouse**

As well as the keyboard, the computer mouse can cause difficulties. However, the use of a mouse and the pointer on a 'Windows-like' screen does not need to be an obstacle for people with disabilities.

Problems associated with the use of a mouse are that it needs to be kept steady, on a flat surface, and can require quick 'clicking' or 'double-clicking'.

However, like a keyboard, the sensitivity of the mouse can be 'tuned', and many of the functions of the mouse can be performed using keyboard 'shortcuts' (for example, hitting 'Control' and 'S' instead of clicking 'Save'). The keyboard itself can be used to move the pointer on the screen, rather than using the mouse at all. In some cases, it may be useful to replace the mouse with a 'trackball' (a ball on the top of a box, which is controlled by moving the fingers) or a joystick.

## **Monitor**

For people with visual impairments, computer monitors can be altered easily for background colour, letter colour, or the style of lettering. There are, of course, larger screens available to present the images more clearly, and you



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can buy computer programs to enlarge the image on a screen.

### **Operating systems**

Many of the modifications discussed above can be made without new equipment and at no extra cost. Systems such as Microsoft Windows or Mac OS have built into them a number of 'accessibility features', some of which are similar to the options above. These include functions to 'hold down' keys, or to 'slow down' keys so that letters will not be repeated, or to allow the mouse to be controlled using the computer's number keys. They also include features for people with visual impairments to enlarge the display on the monitor or to change background displays. For people with hearing impairments, they allow text warnings to appear on the screen when the computer makes a sound, and in some cases can 'read' a document or web page.

Accessibility features on Windows systems can be found by clicking 'Start – Settings – Control Panel', and double-clicking 'Accessibility Features'. For Mac computers, the features are included on the system software but may have to be installed from a disk, which should have come with the computer. Instructions on how to install these features are available from the Apple website (see the 'Further information' section at the end of this information sheet for more details).

Voice recognition programs and voice synthesizers are also available, ranging from relatively inexpensive to quite expensive items.

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### **Laptops**

Advances in computer technology mean that laptops are now smaller, lighter, and almost as powerful as desktop computers. A laptop can be very useful for someone with Parkinson's, as it can be used without being confined to one location, for example it can be easily used on a wheelchair or while reclining in bed.

A difficulty with laptops, however, lies in the alternatives to the mouse that are available, usually a 'touchpad' or a 'pointer'. These can prove very difficult to use, especially for someone with reduced motor control. One solution to this might be to attach a mouse, but this then limits the mobility of the computer, as a mouse must be kept on a flat surface. Some people find it helpful to use keystroke alternatives or mouse alternatives such as trackballs (discussed above) when using a laptop. Laptops also tend to be more expensive than ordinary desktop computers.

### **The internet**

The internet is a global computer network that contains vast amounts of information, in text, video, audio or picture formats, usually presented on what are known as 'web pages'. Much of the information on the internet is contained in a system known as the 'World Wide Web'. The web supports specially formatted documents with links to other documents, graphics, audio and video files. Although the words 'internet' and 'World Wide Web' are often used interchangeably, not all internet servers are part of the World Wide Web.

The internet can be a very valuable resource for people with Parkinson's, and for their families and carers. It can provide multiple sources of information, encouragement and support from



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others worldwide who have similar experiences to share and discuss. Internet access is available for as little as the cost of a local call. Some of the more useful sources are websites and mailing lists, details of which are listed below.

### **Websites**

Websites are collections of documents (also known as web pages) that have been put together by an individual or organisation. They can be found at web 'addresses', which usually begin with the prefix 'www' (for World Wide Web). For instance, the PDS web address is [www.parkinsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk)

An increasing number of websites are becoming aware of accessibility issues and a number of systems are in place for a website's designer to make the pages easily accessible to everyone. The 'Bobby' system, for example, allows a website to be submitted free of charge for assessment, advice and approval. Websites that are 'Bobby-approved' are designed with accessibility in mind. At the moment, there are about 2,500 'Bobby-approved' sites, a small number compared with the millions of websites available, but still encouraging. This system is only one of a number of standards in place. For more information, visit: [www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org).

### **Searching for information**

Websites often contain information on a variety of subjects, and the multitude of sites may make it difficult to find what you are looking for. It is often useful to begin with a 'search engine', a website that searches through web pages for the information requested. Some useful search engine addresses are:

Google      [www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk)

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Yahoo      [www.uk.yahoo.com](http://www.uk.yahoo.com)

MSN      [www.uk.msn.com](http://www.uk.msn.com)

Altavista      [www.altavista.com](http://www.altavista.com)

UKSprite      [www.uksprite.com](http://www.uksprite.com)  
(Bobby-approved)

A search engine has a box into which the person types words related to their enquiry. It will then present a list of pages that contain items relating to the enquiry. However, the results of a search can be confusing and intimidating, as a search for 'Parkinson's disease', for example, can result in hundreds of thousands of pages. Most search that have tips on searching which are well worth reading in order to make it easier to find the information you are looking for.

### **Parkinson's on the internet**

Listed below are some websites particularly related to Parkinson's, most of which contain 'links' or addresses for other sites, with which you can extend your search. Please note, however, that the PDS is not responsible for the content of these external sites, and that the details provided are for information purposes only.

### **The Parkinson's Disease Society of the United Kingdom (PDS)**

[www.parkinsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk)

For information about Parkinson's and the support available from the Society, the latest news, and an online forum that enables people affected by Parkinson's to interact directly with each other.

### **European Parkinson's Disease Association (EPDA)**

[www.epda.eu.com](http://www.epda.eu.com)



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### **SPRING**

<http://spring.parkinsons.org.uk>

A special interest group for medical research, constituted within the PDS.

### **Younger Parkinson's Network (YPN)**

[www.parkinsons.org.uk/ypn](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk/ypn)

A special interest group within the PDS for people of working age with Parkinson's and their families.

### **National Parkinson Foundation (Florida, USA)**

[www.parkinson.org](http://www.parkinson.org)

Latest news and developments in Parkinson's disease research. Includes a list of publications and events, and an 'Ask the Doctor' facility.

### **Parkinson's Disease Foundation (New York, USA)**

[www.pdf.org](http://www.pdf.org)

Up-to-date news, an 'Ask the Expert' facility, and a free online newsletter.

### **American Parkinson Disease Association (New York, USA)**

[www.apdaparkinson.org](http://www.apdaparkinson.org)

Booklets available for free download and a section for young-onset Parkinson's.

### **Parkinson's Web (USA)**

<http://pdweb.mgh.harvard.edu/>

Comprehensive data and listings on Parkinson's. Includes support and treatment resources.

### **PD Index**

[www.pdindex.org](http://www.pdindex.org)

A directory of Parkinson's information sources on the internet. Compiled by a non-professional, but a useful resource.

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### **WE MOVE (USA)**

[www.wemove.org](http://www.wemove.org)

A comprehensive resource for movement disorder information. For health professionals and all people living with movement disorders.

### **Clinical Trials (USA)**

[www.clinicaltrials.gov/](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov/)

Find the latest information on current and forthcoming clinical trials in the USA.

### **Michael J Fox Foundation**

[www.michaeljfox.org](http://www.michaeljfox.org)

An organisation dedicated to fundraising and sponsorship of research into Parkinson's.

**Please note:** Websites do not always remain active, and some may shut down on occasion. Not all websites are reliable. Anyone with some computer skills can set up a website on any subject. Some may contain information that is incorrect, or malicious in intention.

If you are looking for factual information on Parkinson's or related subjects, it is important to check the origin of the websites you are investigating, to see whether the information is based on someone's individual personal experience or opinion, or based on reliable scientific fact or research. Most sites will have an 'about this site' section where you can obtain more information about the site and who has set it up.

Some useful guidelines for accessing health information on the internet can be found at [www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/tech\\_fact\\_sheets/pdf/health\\_e.pdf](http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/seniors-aines/pubs/tech_fact_sheets/pdf/health_e.pdf). These are designed to make people aware of some simple questions that should be asked about the site and the information it provides.



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If you are concerned about any information you come across on the internet, please discuss it with your doctor or another health professional, or with the PDS.

### Mailing lists

Mailing lists are usually free email-based lists, to which a person subscribes via their personal email address. Depending on the type of list, subscribers may receive regular news updates, or may also be able to contribute to discussions in an informal atmosphere. For people with Parkinson's, their families and carers, there are numerous mailing lists, of varying volume and membership. The following are just a sample. Some lists may also direct a person to other lists that may be of use.

**Please note:** The content of these lists is not the responsibility of the PDS and the details are provided for information purposes only. These details are correct at the time of publication but may be subject to change.

**ASK THE DOCTOR:** this is a question and answer forum produced by Abraham Lieberman, an American professor of neurology and the Medical Director of the National Parkinson's Foundation (NPF) based in Florida. For more details and to subscribe, see the NPF website – [www.parkinson.org](http://www.parkinson.org). It also has several other forums run by other professionals involved in the care of people with Parkinson's.

**PARKINSN:** This is probably the main Parkinson's mailing list. With a large number of members, it can get quite busy, sometimes with around 20 or 30 messages a day. Subscribers are varied, including people with

Parkinson's, carers, family members, health professionals and researchers. Members are welcome to contribute, leading to a lively network of information exchange. To subscribe, send an email to [listserv@listserv.utoronto.ca](mailto:listserv@listserv.utoronto.ca), and in the body of the message (where you would normally write the content of the email), write SUB PARKINSN (your first name) (Your last name).

**CARE:** As the title suggests, this list is intended specifically for carers, to offer a forum where they can discuss matters related to caring for people with Parkinson's. Again, not only can carers subscribe to this list, but they also have a separate space where they can voice their concerns with people who are facing the same issues. To subscribe, email Camilla Flintermann at [flintec@muohio.edu](mailto:flintec@muohio.edu) for instructions. See also the website: [www.pdcaregiver.org](http://www.pdcaregiver.org).

**SPARKLE:** This is a mailing list set up by people with Parkinson's and their carers to give them an outlet to share jokes, poems or stories that they have found or written. It provides an opportunity for people to share their creativity with others, to have a laugh or join in a conversation with people who won't necessarily be talking about Parkinson's but who will be very much aware of what it is like to be living with the condition. To subscribe to SPARKLE, visit: <http://mailman.coles.org.uk/mailman/listinfo/sparkle>.

With all the lists above, removing a subscription is very simple. On subscription, most lists will automatically send a message confirming membership of the list, and instructions and guidelines on use of the list's resources. Included in these should be



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instructions on how to 'unsubscribe' and often an opportunity to opt out of the website forwarding your details to other organisations.

**Please note:** As with websites, some mailing lists become inactive. The above sites and lists were active at the time of writing this information sheet. However, some may have become inactive in the time between printing and distribution.

### Further information

There are a number of facilities available for people to learn more about computers and the internet. Many local colleges and educational establishments run computer courses. Details of these can often be found in local libraries, or by contacting your local authority's education office (listed in the telephone directory under the name of the council). They will also often provide support to students with disabilities, so if you feel you need extra help, don't be afraid to ask them what services they provide.

The government initiative UK online aims to provide the internet's facilities to everyone who wants it. This programme offers both internet access and training in how to use the technology, in a number of centres throughout the UK. For more information, visit [www.ukonlinecentres.com/consumer/](http://www.ukonlinecentres.com/consumer/) or telephone 0800 771234.

If you have a basic knowledge of computers, you may find that you can enhance your knowledge through tutorials available online on the internet or via internet-based courses. For instance, learndirect offers a variety of IT and other courses for people with internet access that can be studied at home as well as at a variety of local learndirect centres. You can contact learndirect on 0800 101901 or via [www.learndirect.co.uk](http://www.learndirect.co.uk).

Microsoft and Apple both have internet-based resources concerned with their software's accessibility features. The Microsoft site ([www.microsoft.com/enable](http://www.microsoft.com/enable)) offers an overview of the features available and also a number of tutorials on how to access and modify them according to your needs. The tutorials can be viewed online, or 'downloaded' (saved onto your computer's memory) so that you can read them without being connected to the internet.

The Apple site ([www.apple.com/accessibility](http://www.apple.com/accessibility)) also describes the different features available on its system and gives instructions on how to install them. It also allows many features to be downloaded should a person have misplaced the system software (disks). The site also directs people to other programs (for example voice recognition software or onscreen keyboards) and hardware (keyboards, monitors, printers, etc) available from other companies and provides 'links' to the websites of these companies for further information.

A number of introductory books are available on computers and the internet. Please note that the PDS does not supply any of these titles. Many books are available through local libraries and include:

*The Rough Guide to the Internet*, P Buckley & D Clark (2009), Rough Guides, ISBN 9781848361065

*How to be a Silver Surfer: A beginner's guide to the Internet*, E Aldridge (2008), 4th edition, Age Concern Books, ISBN 9780862424381



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## **Acknowledgements**

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### **Parkinson's Disease Society**

215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 1EJ, UK

**Tel:** 020 7931 8080 **Fax:** 020 7233 9908

**Helpline:** 0808 800 0303 **Text Relay:** 18001 0808 800 0303 (for textphone users only)

(The Helpline is a confidential service. Calls are free from UK landlines and some mobile networks)

**Email:** [enquiries@parkinsons.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@parkinsons.org.uk) **Website:** [www.parkinsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk)

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To obtain any PDS resource, please go online to [www.parkinsons.org.uk](http://www.parkinsons.org.uk) or contact Sharward Services Ltd, the appointed PDS Distribution House, at Westerfield Business Centre, Main Road, Westerfield, Ipswich, Suffolk IP6 9AB **Tel:** 01473 212115 **Fax:** 01473 212114 **Email:** [parkinsons@sharward.co.uk](mailto:parkinsons@sharward.co.uk)