

Impulsive and compulsive behaviour in Parkinson's

Impulsive and compulsive behaviour is a possible side effect of some Parkinson's drugs. Although only a relatively small number of people experience this behaviour, it can have a big impact on the person affected and those around them.

This information sheet looks at different types of impulsive and compulsive behaviour, including addictive gambling and an overactive sex drive, why it happens and how it can be treated.

What is impulsive and compulsive behaviour?

Impulsive behaviour is when a person can't resist the temptation to carry out certain activities that could lead them to harm themselves or others. In a lot of cases, this behaviour is out of character.

Compulsive behaviour is when a person has an overwhelming drive to act in a certain way, often repetitively, to reduce the worry or tension that they get from their urge.

Impulsive and compulsive behaviour can include addictive gambling, eating and shopping, or an increase in sexual thoughts and feelings. Often, people may have more than one of these behaviours.

How does this relate to Parkinson's?

There seems to be a connection between dopamine agonists – a type of Parkinson's medication – and these types of behaviour, although it is not exactly clear how the medications cause the changes in behaviour.

Research has shown that around 17% of people who take dopamine agonists experience impulsive and/or compulsive behaviour.

For a small number of people, other types of Parkinson's medications, in particular levodopa, have been shown to have similar side effects. The research suggests that 7% of people who take these other kinds of medication may be affected.

“ I thought I would be immune to impulsive and compulsive behaviour, but soon after starting medication, something made me try internet gambling. Unfortunately, almost without realising what was happening, I spent hours in front of my computer and ran up debts on credit cards and loans of more than £40,000. I am no longer on dopamine agonist medication and am having to live frugally, but have managed to agree repayment plans with my creditors and have avoided bankruptcy. It's a nightmare, but at the time, I enjoyed the sound of the slots and genuinely believed I was going to win. ”

JC, diagnosed in 2006

Why do some people with Parkinson's experience impulsive and compulsive behaviour?

Impulsive and compulsive behaviour might be partly related to dopamine – the chemical messenger in the brain that is affected in Parkinson's. As well as helping to control movement, balance and walking, dopamine also plays a big role in the part of the brain that controls reward and motivation. This is important, as people affected by impulsive or compulsive behaviour are driven or motivated to do something that gives them an instant reward. For example, someone who has the impulse to shop might buy a new item of clothing, even if they can't really afford it. Impulsive and compulsive behaviour is most likely to occur in people diagnosed with Parkinson's at a younger age.

Research also shows you may be more likely to experience impulsive or compulsive behaviour if there is a family history of addictive behaviour.

What types of impulsive and compulsive behaviour are there?

These are some of the more common types of impulsive and compulsive behaviour:

Addictive gambling

This is when someone can't resist the impulse to gamble, even though it could have a bad effect on their family or personal finances.

Gambling is more popular and accessible than ever before – especially online. There may be more people affected by compulsive gambling now that it is easier to do.

Hypersexuality

This is when someone is focused on sexual feelings and thoughts. Sexual impulses become more intense and might be felt at inappropriate times. This can be really distressing for the person and those around them.

With hypersexuality, there is also a risk that someone will behave in a way that is socially unacceptable, or may even break the law.

Binge eating

This is when someone eats large amounts of food in a short period of time because they can't control their appetite. This can mean they gain a lot of weight.

People with this impulse may eat alone because they're embarrassed about the amount of food they're eating. This can be very lonely. Eating too much can also lead to feelings of guilt.

Obsessive shopping

This is when people are obsessed with buying things. Some people will get an irresistible need to buy more than they can afford or need. This can cause financial problems similar to those associated with uncontrolled gambling.

Punding

This is when someone does things like continually handling and sorting objects, or they may be fascinated with taking technical equipment apart or collecting a type of object.

This behaviour can mean people don't get enough sleep, and can cause other problems socially, with family or at work. If someone collects objects or takes machinery apart without knowing how to put it back together, it can also have a big financial impact, as they will need to spend money to buy new objects or replace dismantled appliances or other equipment.

Addiction to Parkinson's medication

This is when someone takes more of a drug than they need to control their Parkinson's symptoms.

This behaviour can lead to further side effects, such as severe involuntary movements (dyskinesia). People may also get withdrawal symptoms if the drug is not available. This type of compulsion is known as dopamine dysregulation syndrome.

What should I do if I'm experiencing impulsive and/or compulsive behaviour?

If you think you're experiencing this behaviour, don't be afraid to seek help. It can be a traumatic experience to realise this is happening to you, so it's a strength, rather than a weakness, to get medical advice. Remember that this behaviour is not a reflection on you.

Impulsive and compulsive behaviour can be controlled. Treatment can involve reducing the daily dose of Parkinson's medication, having psychotherapy sessions or trying other types of medication.

We don't advise anyone to stop taking or to change their Parkinson's medication without the advice of their specialist or Parkinson's nurse.

How do I spot the signs of impulsive or compulsive behaviour?

Sometimes people who experience impulsive and compulsive behaviour may not realise they have a problem, so if carers and family members notice any unusual behaviour, it's important they discuss it with a healthcare professional as quickly as possible.

If you're concerned about someone with Parkinson's, look out for any of the following signs:

- Have they recently put on weight? There may be a number of reasons for this, but you might want to look for the signs of binge eating.
- Are they being more protective than usual about their finances?
- Have they started collecting or organising certain objects?
- Have you noticed any repetitive behaviour?
- If the person with Parkinson's is your partner, have you noticed an increase in their sex drive or a change in their sexual behaviour?
- Are they going shopping more often than usual?
- Are they spending more time than usual on their computer (perhaps on shopping or gambling websites)?
- Are they taking more of their Parkinson's medication than they should?
- Do they have aggressive outbursts?
- Is there a family history of gambling or alcoholism, or any of the behaviour above?

What help is available?

Parkinson's healthcare professionals

It's important to realise that steps can be taken to address these changes in behaviour. If you experience impulsive and compulsive behaviour you should ask your Parkinson's nurse or specialist for help.

Find out more: [our Impulsive and compulsive behaviour in Parkinson's information tool can help you talk about this issue with your specialist or Parkinson's nurse.](#)

“My mother became obsessed with moving items from A to B with no purpose and to a place they did not belong. For example, she moved bathroom items to the wardrobe and photos into drawers, and she neither particularly wanted them to be there or, indeed, knew that they were. I never tried to stop her, but managed this by asking her to help me to tidy up. While she slowly, but willingly, took on the task I had asked her to help with, I would look through drawers and return things to their correct place. On visits, I soon learnt never to leave my keys lying around!”

Rachel, whose mum had Parkinson's

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 can also provide details and links to local services. They provide support for anyone affected by Parkinson's.

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 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**

Side effects from Parkinson's drugs can take many forms and our helpline deals with many enquiries related to side effects each year.

You can also report any side effects to the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Authority (MHRA), the Government body responsible for ensuring medicines work and are safe. To do so, you should complete a Yellow Card form, available from your pharmacist, GP, specialist or via the Yellow Card hotline (**0808 100 3352**). You can also complete this form online, or download and print it out from **www.yellowcard.gov.uk**

While some of these side effects can be embarrassing, it is important to seek help if you recognise any of these issues in yourself or someone you know. The organisations listed on this page offer a sensitive and professional service.

If debt has become a problem, these agencies may be able to help:

National Debtline

0808 808 4000
www.nationaldebtline.co.uk

Consumer Credit Counselling Service

0800 138 1111
www.cccs.co.uk

Gamcare

Support, information and advice for anyone experiencing a gambling problem. Gamcare's website offers the option to talk live online with a trained adviser, or to use its forum and chatroom to speak to others going through a similar experience.

0845 600 0133

www.gamcare.org.uk

Solicitors Regulation Authority

If you'd like some legal advice about any of these issues, you can find a solicitor by contacting the Solicitors Regulation Authority. If you visit the website, you can follow the link to search for a solicitor.

0870 606 2555

www.sra.org.uk

To talk to someone about problems with hypersexuality, call the Parkinson's UK helpline on **0808 800 0303** or contact:

College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists

020 8543 2707

info@cosrt.org.uk

www.cosrt.org.uk

Relate

Relate offers counselling for people with sexual or relationship problems.

0300 100 1234

enquiries@relate.org.uk

www.relate.org.uk

Thank you

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

Dr Iracema Leroi, Consultant Psychiatrist for the Elderly and Honorary Senior Lecturer with a special interest in mental health in Parkinson's

Jane Price, Parkinson's Disease Nurse Specialist, Powys Teaching Local Health Board

Louise Ebenezer, Parkinson's Disease Nurse Specialist MSc, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board, Princess of Wales Hospital, Bridgend

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?

- GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse
- Parkinson's UK local group or event
- Our website
- Information and support worker
- Ordered from us directly
- 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 Parkinson's.

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

Address

Telephone Email