Physiotherapy and Parkinson’s

People with Parkinson’s may find that they have problems with everyday movements such as walking, or getting in and out of a chair or bed.

This information sheet looks at what difficulties you may experience and how physiotherapy can help. It also discusses what advice physiotherapists might give carers.

What is a physiotherapist?

A physiotherapist (often called a physio) is a healthcare professional who helps keep people moving and functioning as much as possible when they are affected by injury, illness or long-term conditions, such as Parkinson’s. They are part of the multidisciplinary team who can help you manage your condition.

Physios work in a wide variety of settings, such as hospitals and outpatient clinics, as well as community settings, such as care homes, GP surgeries and people’s own homes.

Like many other health professionals, physios take additional training to specialise in different areas of practice — some work specifically with people with neurological conditions, such as Parkinson’s.

Seeing a physio can benefit a person with Parkinson’s and their carers. Clinical guidelines recommend that physiotherapy should be available for people with Parkinson’s. We therefore recommend that you are referred to a physio by your GP or specialist as soon as possible after your diagnosis. You can also be referred by your Parkinson’s nurse, if you have one. A Parkinson’s nurse is a qualified registered general nurse with specialist experience, knowledge and skills in Parkinson’s. They play a vital role in the care of people with Parkinson’s. You can read more about them on page 4.

How can a physio help me?

Physios will assess how Parkinson’s is affecting your movement and function. This can be done whether you are newly diagnosed, or have been diagnosed for some time.
In the early stages of Parkinson's, your physio can give you advice, education and support in keeping up your fitness levels and good posture to help you remain independent. As the condition gets worse, your physio may focus on your walking, posture and balance. They may also start to help you build, or work with your support network – involving your family and carers as part of your treatment.

These are some of the ways your physiotherapist may be able to help you.

**Improving or maintaining fitness through exercise**
A physio can help you to maintain your fitness by providing an exercise programme for you to follow at home. They may also give advice on suitable sports activities such as golf, or an exercise class like yoga or t’ai chi. They can show you how to stretch and position stiff muscles and joints to maintain good posture and keep your joints flexible. This will help to relieve stiffness. It will also help you to move more smoothly. Exercise can help with stress. The evidence is building that exercise may have extra benefits for people with Parkinson’s, such as helping them to walk more quickly and giving better balance.

**Find out more:** see our exercise booklet and DVD, *Keeping moving* if you want to learn about gentle exercise for posture and balance.

**Helping you to move about**
Physios can also teach you techniques that help make some automatic movements, such as walking, sitting down and standing up, easier. These may become more difficult as your Parkinson’s progresses, but can be improved by learning new ways of doing things.

**Helping you to maintain independence in your daily life**
If certain movements are difficult, such as getting up out of a chair or turning in bed, a physio can teach you a different way of doing these things. This may be done in a physiotherapy department or by a visit to your home. They can also give advice on aids and equipment that you could use or alterations you could make to your home environment to make mobility easier and safer.

In some cases, it may be an occupational therapist that deals with home adaptations. Always try and check first with a physio before you buy any piece of equipment or aid. Because no two people with Parkinson’s are alike, what might work for one person might not suit someone else.

**Find out more:** see our information sheets, *Equipment and disability aids* and *Occupational therapy and Parkinson’s*.

**Helping to prevent or manage falls**
The physio may work with you on strength and balance training and improving your ability to walk. This training will improve your confidence and help to reduce any fear of falling. They can also teach techniques to help you get up if you fall. Often a physio will work with an occupational therapist to make sure your home is hazard free.

“I was referred to a physiotherapist for a neck injury. He was very interested in Parkinson’s and had been on a course about the condition. I was so impressed and came away with lots of information that works. He gave me some tips for problems, such as freezing in doorways, and some exercises that I have found very helpful.”

*Josie, diagnosed in 2007*
Providing pain relief
There are five main types of pain that can be associated with Parkinson's. These are pain in the muscles and bones (musculoskeletal), involuntary muscle spasms (dystonic), primary or central pain nerve pain (neuropathic) and restlessness, or being unable to keep still (akathisia-related pain). Your physiotherapist can assess your pain to try to find the cause.

They can then use methods such as manual therapy, heat, or cold to help relieve pain you may have. They can also use therapeutic ultrasound to reduce uncomfortable nodules that can be caused by use of the Parkinson’s medication Apomorphine. More therapists are being trained in complementary techniques such as acupuncture, which may also help to reduce pain.

Maintaining or improving effective breathing
Parkinson’s can cause stiffness and weakening of the chest muscles, which may lead to chest infections. A therapist can use positioning or other techniques to help clear the phlegm and keep the chest clear. Breathing exercises may also improve your breathing and can help if your voice has become softer.

Preventing circulation problems
Physios can teach you different ways to sit or lie to help prevent problems with your circulation. If your movement is very restricted this may affect your circulation as your muscles won’t be pumping blood around the body as they contract.

What advice can a physio give carers?
If you are a carer and help a person with Parkinson’s move around, it is vitally important that you get advice from a physiotherapist about caring for your own body, most importantly your back. They can provide advice on the best way to help the person you are caring for to move.

If it becomes necessary to have equipment in the house to help you with these tasks, a physio or an occupational therapist can advise you on the most suitable equipment to use and the best places to put them.

How do I find a physio?
You can be referred to a physio by your GP, specialist, or Parkinson’s nurse. In some areas, you can refer yourself at the local hospital or a Community Health Clinic, depending on the type of service available. You may find you have to wait before you receive an appointment, as most NHS physiotherapy departments have waiting lists.

Some Parkinson’s UK local groups have group physiotherapy sessions, check with your local group for details. Call the helpline on 0808 800 0303 or see our website parkinsons.org.uk/localgroups to find your local group.

There are also a growing number of private physios who run clinics and make home visits. When you contact them, make sure that they have specialist knowledge in dealing with people with Parkinson’s, because not all physios do.

Be aware that, unlike NHS physios, those in private practice will charge for their services.

To find a private physio visit the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy’s website www.csp.org.uk
More information and support

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy
020 7306 6666
www.csp.org.uk

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 make contact with other health and social care professionals to make sure your needs are met.

The role of the Parkinson’s nurse varies. Each will offer different services, aiming to meet local needs. Some nurses are based in the community, whereas others are based in hospital settings.

Many Parkinson’s nurses are independent prescribers. This means they can prescribe and make adjustments to medication, so someone with Parkinson’s doesn’t always need to see their specialist for changes to or queries about their Parkinson’s drugs.

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

You can find out more at parkinsons.org.uk/nurses

Information and support from Parkinson’s UK
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. We run a peer support service if you’d like to talk on the phone with someone affected by Parkinson’s who has faced similar issues to you. The service is free and confidential – ring the helpline to talk to someone about being matched with a volunteer.

Our helpline can also put you in touch with one of our local information and support workers, who give one-to-one information and support to anyone affected by Parkinson’s. They can also provide links to local groups and services.

We also have self-management programme for people with Parkinson’s, partners and carers. It is an opportunity to reflect on life with the condition, learn about self-management and think about the future. To find out if there is a group near you visit parkinsons.org.uk/selfmanagement

Our website parkinsons.org.uk has a lot of information about Parkinson’s and everyday life with the condition. You can also find details of your local support team and your nearest local group meeting at parkinsons.org.uk/localtoyou

You can also visit parkinsons.org.uk/forums to speak with other people in a similar situation on our online discussion forum.

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

Bhanu Ramaswamy, Independent Physiotherapy Consultant

Julie Ridden, Superintendent Physiotherapist, Northumbria Healthcare Trust

Anna Jones, Reader, School of Health, Community and Education Studies, Northumbria University

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

Physiotherapy and Parkinson’s (2014)
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 Resources and Diversity, 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     ☐ Information and support worker
☐ Parkinson’s UK local group or event   ☐ Ordered from us directly
☐ Our website                           ☐ Other ..............................................................................................................................

How useful have you found the information sheet? (1 is not useful, 4 is very useful)  ☐ 1  ☐ 2  ☐ 3  ☐ 4
Have you found the publication easy to read/use?  ☐ Yes  ☐ No
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
0845 121 2354
resources@parkinsons.org.uk
Download them from our website at 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

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

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hello@parkinsons.org.uk
parkinsons.org.uk
*calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks.

Has this resource given you information that might help you manage your condition better?
☐ NA  ☐ It hasn’t helped  ☐ It has helped a little  ☐ It has helped a lot

What aspects did you find most helpful?
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Were you looking for any information that wasn’t covered?
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Do you have any other comments?
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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 ......................................................................................................................................................................................

What is your ethnic background?  ☐ Asian or Asian British  ☐ Black or Black British  ☐ Chinese  ☐ Mixed  ☐ White British  ☐ White other  ☐ Other (please specify)