Dental and oral health in Parkinson’s

Some people with Parkinson’s may have problems with their dental and oral health. This information sheet explains what these problems can be, why they happen and what can be done to help.

Why is it important to look after my teeth and mouth?
A healthy mouth will help you to chew, taste, swallow and speak properly. It means you can eat the foods you like, rather than the ones your teeth allow you to.

To keep up good oral health, you should:

- brush your teeth twice a day with a toothpaste containing fluoride. Ask your dentist if you are not sure about the level of fluoride in your toothpaste
- use a daily fluoride mouthwash at a different time to brushing
- brush last thing at night and one other time during the day
- try not to rinse your mouth after spitting out your toothpaste
- reduce the amount of sugary food and drinks you have – limit them to meal times and no more than four times a day
- visit your dentist regularly

What oral and dental problems are common for people with Parkinson’s?
Having Parkinson’s doesn’t mean that you will have problems with your dental health.

But the nature of Parkinson’s, and some of the medication used to treat the condition, may mean that you have more uncommon problems. Parkinson’s symptoms can also make cleaning your teeth more difficult.
The main dental problems you could see are:

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

**Swallowing difficulties**

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 how tightly you can close your lips. If you can't close your lips tightly, it can become difficult to swallow. This can lead to weight loss and embarrassment.

A speech and language therapist may be able to help you with swallowing problems. They may be able to suggest 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.

Your specialist, GP or Parkinson's nurse (if you have one) can refer you to a speech and language therapist, or, if necessary, you can self-refer. Not all speech and language therapists are specialists in Parkinson's, however, so make sure you ask to see someone who has experience of working with people living with the condition.

**Find out more:** see our information sheets *Eating, swallowing and saliva control* and *Speech and language therapy and Parkinson's.*

**Dry mouth**

Parkinson’s drugs can sometimes reduce the flow of saliva to your mouth. They can also lead to taste disturbances. Saliva is key to oral health. It is needed for eating, taste and to lubricate food to assist swallowing. It has antibacterial properties and enzymes to help digest food.

A dry mouth can lead to higher rates of tooth decay and gum disease. It can also lead to an increased risk of getting decay in the exposed roots of teeth. It may also cause dentures to become loose and hard to control.

A dry mouth can also increase the harmful effects of sugar on teeth, making it more important to watch what you eat and when you eat. See page 3 for more about sugar and tooth decay.

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

You should also mention having a dry mouth to your GP, specialist or Parkinson’s nurse as there may be other treatments that doesn’t cause this problem. Saliva substitutes are also available – ask your GP, dentist or local pharmacist about this.

“...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 much easier to grip. Also the rotating bristles make it easier to clean my teeth properly.”

Kris, diagnosed in 2004
The following tips may help reduce dry mouth.

Do:

- try to take frequent sips of water
- chew sugar free gum
- use lip salve or Vaseline to keep your lips moist
- remove dentures at night to give your mouth a chance to recover
- eat a healthy diet. If you are thinking about changing your diet, a dietitian will be able to help you

**Find out more:** see our booklet *Parkinson’s and diet*.

Don’t:

- smoke – it makes the dryness worse
- use mouthwashes that have not been prescribed by your dentist or doctor. They may contain alcohol, which can increase dryness
- suck sweets to increase saliva – this will increase decay and other oral problems
- sip sugary drinks between meals. This will also increase decay and other oral problems
- use your teeth to open bottles or bite or chew hard objects

**Burning mouth**

Some people with Parkinson’s complain of a burning mouth feeling. This can be due to a dry mouth and or taking Levodopa. If you are affected, speak to your dentist or doctor.

**Increase in tooth decay**

The bacteria in plaque changes sugar into acid, which attacks your teeth. This leads to cavities and tooth decay. How often sugar is in contact with your teeth can be more damaging than the amount of sugar you eat.

To stop tooth decay from happening you can try the following:

- Try not to eat or drink sugary things more than four times a day.
- Snacks between meals should be sugar free, for example cheese or vegetables.
- Sugary drinks should be restricted to meal times. Try drinking water or sugar–free tea or coffee between meals.
- Brush your teeth twice a day with a fluoride toothpaste (your dentist may prescribe a highly concentrated one). After spitting your toothpaste out, don’t rinse your mouth and avoid having anything to eat or drink for 30 minutes.
- 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. They may also apply a fluoride varnish to your teeth.
Drooling

Drooling is common for people with Parkinson’s and may be due to people with the condition not being able to swallow as well as they used to. If you swallow less, saliva pools in your mouth and instead of being swallowed it overflows from the corners of your mouth. This may happen when you’re concentrating on other things, such as watching TV or doing day-to-day activities.

Drooling or dribbling can also 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 or cause embarrassment. It may also lead to lip infections.

Some people with Parkinson’s can also find that their posture adds to the problem. Those who have a stooped, head-down position can find it hard to seal their lips. This can make it harder to control saliva flowing from the mouth.

You can also try these simple exercises at home in front of a mirror to try help prevent drooling. They’ll help you become more aware of what your lips are doing and how tight you need to hold them closed to keep saliva in:

- Close your lips as tightly as possible and hold for a count of four, relax, then repeat five times.
- Smack your lips together as if puffing on a pipe.
- Stretch your lips in a wide smile, hold for a count of four and relax.

In addition, you can try aids to help you to remember to swallow, for example a timed bleeper brooch that uses sound to prompt you to swallow. Your speech and language therapist may also be able to help.

Find out more: see our information sheet Eating, swallowing and saliva control.

Controlling dentures

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

- Problems 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.

Ask your dentist to check your dentures if you’re having problems controlling them – they can suggest ways to improve control.
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 from getting worse. How often you should visit your dentist depends on your individual needs, but as a general rule, you should consider visiting every six months (or earlier if you discover any new problem). Your dentist will advise you on how often you need to have a check-up.

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 prevention of oral problems.

If you're unable to go to your dentist, ask if home visits may be possible. Many dentists will do this, but if they cannot they can either refer you onto a colleague who does, or give you information on where to seek help.

Will my Parkinson’s mean I need to see a specialist dentist?
It’s important to tell your dentist that you have Parkinson’s and how it can affect you. Most dentists will be able to treat people in the early stages of Parkinson’s and many will be able to treat those in the more advanced stages of the condition. If your dentist feels you need specialist care, they will refer you to a colleague on the General Dental Council’s ‘special care’ register.

You may find it helpful to tell your dentist if you think you may have physical difficulties during your appointments because of your symptoms.

Tips for people with natural teeth
It is important to clean all tooth surfaces, especially the area where the tooth leaves the gum. Don’t forget to clean both sides of your teeth as well as the biting surface. You should use whichever technique you find easiest. 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. Your dentist may advise you on toothbrush handle adaptations which can help improve your grip. You may find it easier to use a three-sided toothbrush or one with an angled head. A small head may also help you reach all of your teeth. You could also consider an electric or battery-operated brush, as the extra weight may help to reduce hand and arm tremours.

If you have a carer who cleans your teeth, they may find it easier to stand behind you when brushing your teeth (dentists always clean patients’ teeth from behind). Or, if they are right-handed, they may clean your left side teeth from behind you and your right side teeth while standing in front of you.

Ask your dentist for help on choosing the best toothbrush for you. They will also be able to help you find the best way to clean your teeth and the gaps in-between.

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, just as it does on natural teeth, causing irritation to the skin on the roof of your mouth, cheeks and gums. It may help you to do the following:

- Always clean dentures over a sink full of water. That way, if you accidentally drop them, you can avoid breaking them.
- Soak your denture overnight in water and then brush them gently under water.
Never use toothpaste on dentures because it’s too abrasive – it’s similar to cleaning plastic with a Brillo pad. Denture pastes are available.

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 do 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 dentist about any specific problems.

More information and support

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

NHS Choices
www.nhs.uk

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/forum 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:

Christine Arnold, Senior Dental Officer, Specialist in Special Care Dentistry

Lee Kieft, Parkinson's Nurse, Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust

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

Dental and oral health in 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

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) ..............................................................................................................................................
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

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