



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease is named after James Parkinson, a physician who first described it in 1817. Parkinson's is a disease of the brain caused by the gradual loss of nerve cells in the area that controls movement. When 80 percent of these special nerve cells have died or do not function properly, normal control of movements and balance is impaired and symptoms may develop.

The most common and well-recognized sign of Parkinson's disease is a tremor of the hand that occurs when the hand is at rest. This tremor is usually a rhythmic shaking in the relaxed hand that goes away when the hand is used. Tremors can also occur in the leg or the jaw. People who have Parkinson's disease may move slower, have rigid limbs, and their posture may be a little unstable.

Sometimes the symptoms first appear only in one arm or leg, with a loss of one arm's swing when walking or a dragging of one foot. Early signs of Parkinson's disease can sometimes be mistaken for a stroke because only one side of the body seems impaired.

Parkinson's disease affects both men and women of all races, and occurs in adulthood. The average age when symptoms develop is 57, but as many as 40 percent of the people who develop Parkinson's disease may exhibit symptoms before the age of 50. The disease progresses gradually and may take 20 or 30 years to become disabling. Approximately one million Americans currently have Parkinson's disease, making it the second most frequent degenerative brain disorder in the United States, after Alzheimer's disease, which is the most common.

At present, we do not know the cause of the degeneration of the nerve cells in the brain that results in Parkinson's disease. Current theory suggests that both heredity and environmental factors bring about this disease. It's possible that genetics predisposes a person to be vulnerable to certain toxins found in the environment, thus causing the nerve cell loss. In any case, there is no known way to prevent Parkinson's disease.

Although there is currently no cure for Parkinson's, patients who regularly exercise and remain fit do much better in managing their symptoms. They can follow a simple exercise plan of daily walking or stretching to maintain flexibility.

If you have any of the symptoms of Parkinson's disease—such as a tremor of the hand, foot, or jaw, or problems balancing or walking—tell your health care professional. If he or she suspects a neurological disorder, you may be referred to a neurologist—a physician who specializes in diagnosing and treating brain and nerve disorders. The neurologist will do a detailed examination, and may prescribe a number of medications that are extremely effective in improving the physical symptoms of Parkinson's disease. The most basic and effective drug is Sinemet. More than 90 percent of patients with Parkinson's disease respond to some combination

of individual drugs with improved symptoms.



For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at www.kaiserpermanente.org/california, then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION