

Treating Parkinson's Nutrition and PD



Eating a balanced diet is essential to feeling well and maintaining energy, particularly if you are someone who lives with Parkinson's disease (PD). In addition to being generally beneficial to health, good nutrition can address some common Parkinson's symptoms such as constipation and loss of bone strength, as well as weight loss or gain related to Parkinson's.

This is not always easy. The symptoms of Parkinson's prevent some people from getting the nutrients they need. Tremor, slowness and stiffness can make eating difficult. Nausea caused by medications, along with problems with eating and swallowing, may cause some people to eat less.

But there are ways to improve your nutrition and make eating easier. These strategies may help you to manage your Parkinson's symptoms and feel stronger overall. Let us look at a few of these:

A Basic Nutritional Plan

How can you know that you are getting the right nutrients? There is no special diet for Parkinson's. The most important thing you can do is simply to keep a balanced diet.

- Eat a variety of foods from all food groups — grains, vegetables, fruits, milk and dairy products, as well as sources of protein such as a meat, fish and beans.
- Consider following a Mediterranean-style diet, which can help you to maintain a healthy weight and lower your risk of heart disease and diabetes. This includes daily servings of whole grains, fruits, vegetables and eggs and small amounts of nuts such as almonds and walnuts. Nuts, olive oil, fish and eggs all contain beneficial fats.
- It is advisable not to follow a low carbohydrate diet such as Atkins. Why? First, people with Parkinson's need carbohydrates. Second, low carbohydrate diets are often high in protein and fat that may compete with Parkinson's medications, such as Sinemet®. Lastly, this type of diet may lead to avoidance of fruits and vegetables, which contain vital nutrients such as the B vitamins, fiber, and phytosterols.
- Read labels and avoid products with sodium greater than 500mg/ serving (for an entrée). Condiments are often full of sodium as well.

Focus on Fluids

Drinking water is important generally and helps to alleviate constipation, which is one of the most common symptoms of Parkinson's. It also prevents a host of other health problems that can result from being dehydrated, including impaired mental function, a weakened heart and fainting.

- Aim to drink one and a half liters of water each day — that's six glasses, or three half-liter bottles.
- Keep water nearby so that you remember to take frequent sips.
- If you feel awkward handling a bottle, try different kinds of cups, such as those with lids or straws.
- Use weighted cups, which may help ease tremor while you are drinking.

Include Fiber in Your Diet

Eating foods with fiber is important for health bowel function and preventing constipation. Fiber can also help to lower cholesterol. Doctors recommend at least 25 grams of fiber per day for women and 35 grams for men. How can you get enough?

- Start the day with a breakfast cereal that contains at least four grams of fiber per serving.
- Include whole grains in your diet by eating brown rice, whole grain breads (with three grams or more of dietary fiber per slice), chickpeas, millet and wheat pasta.

(over please)



- Include one to two and a half cups of fruit per day in your diet. Try apples, bananas, oranges and strawberries.
- Eat between one-third and one and one-third cup per day of dark green or orange vegetables (such as carrots and squash) and legumes. One-half a cup of broccoli, for example, provides four grams of fiber, as does one-half a cup of green beans.
- Check the nutrition labeling on foods to find their fiber content. In general, whole grain foods have more fiber than foods made with refined grains, but claims of whole grains on the packages do not necessarily mean that a food is high in fiber.

Vitamin D for Bone Health

Your body needs vitamin D in order to absorb calcium, which builds and maintains bones. Vitamin D also has benefits for muscular strength, balance and the immune system. Studies have shown that people living with Parkinson's have low levels of vitamin D and are at increased risk for osteoporosis – a thinning of the bones that can make you susceptible to fractures if you fall. How can you ensure your levels are sufficient?

- Sunlight in small doses, is a good source of vitamin D, but people who do not go outside often or who live in northern climates may not make enough.
- Try drinking fortified milk and milk products, or eating fish such as salmon. This will help, but some people find it is difficult to get enough vitamin D from food.
- Talk to your doctor about taking a supplement that combines vitamin D with calcium. Recommendations vary, but at least 400 IU (international units) per day is generally suggested for people between the ages of 51 and 70 years.

Managing PD Symptoms

Try these tips to make meal-times easier and more enjoyable.

- Place plates on silicone and rubber mats to prevent them from slipping.
- Eat at a bar, or with your plate raised up on a box, so that the food is nearer to the mouth.
- Place your elbows on the table, to steady the

hands and arms while you are eating.

- Consider consulting a nutritionist for tips on preparing foods that are easier to chew and swallow.
- If you experience anxiety or depression, talk to your doctor. These symptoms can suppress appetite.
- Ask your doctor for advice on adjusting medicines and meal times to help with nausea.
- Maintain a healthy weight through nutrition and exercise. To find out if your body weight falls in a healthy range, calculate your body mass index (BMI), which compares your weight to your height. A simple BMI calculator is available at www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/.

Balancing Meals and Medications

If you take levodopa for your Parkinson's, you may find that the medication takes longer to be effective or works less well when you take it with a protein-rich food. To correct this problem, talk to your doctor about the possibility of going on a "protein-distribution" diet. With this diet, you would take levodopa 30-60 minutes before a meal to give the medication a head start on the meal. When you eat, you would avoid protein when you want to have maximum mobility.

If you take levodopa and experience motor fluctuations, consider working with a nutritionist to understand how to distribute protein-rich foods throughout the day, and to be sure you are taking in enough protein and carbohydrates.

Conclusion

By using some of these strategies and speaking with your doctor about changes in diet, you can improve your nutrition and feel your best each day.

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Related fact sheets:

- Physical Therapy in PD
- Speech Therapy in PD

If you have or believe you have Parkinson's disease, then promptly consult a physician and follow your physician's advice. This publication is not a substitute for a physician's diagnosis of Parkinson's disease or for a physician's prescription of drugs, treatment or operations for Parkinson's disease.

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