

Ten Early Signs of Parkinson's Disease Doctors Often Miss

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Caring.com - Let's be honest: A diagnosis of Parkinson's disease can be pretty unnerving. In fact, an April 2011 survey by the National Parkinson's Foundation revealed that people will avoid visiting the doctor to discuss Parkinson's even when experiencing worrisome symptoms, such as a tremor.

The problem, however, is that waiting prevents you from beginning treatment that -- although it can't cure Parkinson's -- can buy you time. "We now have medications with the potential to slow progression of the disease, and you want to get those on board as soon as possible," says Illinois neurologist Michael Rezak, M.D., who directs the American Parkinson's Disease Association National Young Onset Center.

Parkinson's disease (PD) occurs when nerve cells in the brain that produce the neurotransmitter dopamine begin to die off. When early signs go unnoticed, people don't discover they have Parkinson's until the disease has progressed. "By the time you experience the main symptoms of Parkinson's, such as tremor and stiffness, you've already lost 40 to 50 percent of your dopamine-producing neurons. Starting medication early allows you to preserve the greatest possible number of them," Rezak explains.

10 often-missed signs that can help you identify and get early treatment for Parkinson's.

Loss of sense of smell

This is one of the oddest, least-known, and often earliest signs of Parkinson's disease, but it almost always goes unrecognized until later. "Patients say they were at a party and everyone was remarking on how strong a woman's perfume was, and they couldn't smell it," says Rezak.

Along with loss of smell may come loss of taste, because the two senses overlap so much. "Patients notice that their favorite foods don't taste right," Rezak says.

Dopamine is a chemical messenger that carries signals between the brain and muscles and nerves throughout the body. As dopamine-producing cells die off, the sense of smell becomes impaired, and messages such as odor cues don't get through. Some researchers consider this change so revealing that they're working to develop a screening test for smell function.

Trouble sleeping

Neurologists stay on the alert for a sleep condition known as rapid eye-movement behavior disorder (RBD), in which people essentially act out their dreams during REM sleep, the deepest stage of sleep. People with RBD may shout, kick, or grind their teeth. They may even attack their bed partners. As many as 40 percent of people who have RBD eventually develop Parkinson's, Rezak says, often as much as ten years later, making this a warning sign worth taking seriously.

Two other sleep problems commonly associated with Parkinson's are restless leg syndrome (a tingling or prickling sensation in the legs and the feeling that you have to move them) and sleep apnea (the sudden momentary halt of breathing during sleep). Not all patients with these conditions have Parkinson's, of course, but a significant number of Parkinson's patients -- up to 40 percent in the case of sleep apnea -- have these conditions. So they can provide a tip-off to be alert for other signs and symptoms.

Constipation and other bowel and bladder problems

One of the most common early signs of Parkinson's -- and most overlooked, since there are many possible causes -- is constipation and gas. This results because Parkinson's can affect the autonomic nervous system, which regulates the activity of smooth muscles such as those that work the bowels and

bladder. Both bowel and bladder can become less sensitive and efficient, slowing down the entire digestive process.

One way to recognize the difference between ordinary constipation and constipation caused by Parkinson's is that the latter is often accompanied by a feeling of fullness, even after eating very little, and it can last over a long period of time. When the urinary tract is affected, some people have trouble urinating while others begin having episodes of incontinence. The medications used to treat Parkinson's are effective for this and other symptoms.

Lack of facial expression

Loss of dopamine can affect the facial muscles, making them stiff and slow and resulting in a characteristic lack of expression. "Some people refer to it as 'stone face' or 'poker face,'" says neurologist Pam Santamaria, a Parkinson's expert at the Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. "But it's really more like a flattening -- the face isn't expressing the emotions the person's feeling."

The term "Parkinson's mask" is used to describe the extreme form of this condition, but that doesn't come until later. As an early symptom, the changes are subtle: It's easiest to recognize by a slowness to smile or frown, or staring off into the distance, Santamaria says. Another sign is less frequent blinking.

Persistent neck pain

This sign is particularly common in women, who have reported it as the third most-common warning sign they noticed (after tremor and stiffness) in surveys about how they first became aware of the disease.

Parkinson's-related neck pain differs from common neck pain mainly in that it persists, unlike a pulled muscle or cramp, which should go away after a day or two. In some people, this symptom shows up less as pain and more as numbness and tingling. Or it might feel like an achiness or discomfort that reaches down the shoulder and arm and leads to frequent attempts to stretch the neck.

Slow, cramped handwriting

One of the symptoms of Parkinson's, known as bradykinesia, is the slowing down and loss of spontaneous and routine movement. Handwriting is one of the most common places bradykinesia shows up. Writing begins to become slower and more labored, and it often looks smaller and tighter than before. "Sometimes a family member will notice that someone's handwriting is becoming very spidery and hard to read," Santamaria says.

Washing and dressing are other areas where bradykinesia appears. Someone may take a long time to get dressed or be unable to deal with zippers and other fasteners.

Changes in voice and speech

As the brain signals and muscles that control speech are affected by Parkinson's, a person's voice begins to change, often becoming much softer and more monotone. This is frequently one of the first early signs of Parkinson's that family and friends notice, often long before the patient becomes aware of it.

Slurring words is also characteristic of Parkinson's, because as the facial muscles stiffen, it becomes harder to enunciate clearly. "Some patients begin to have trouble opening their mouths as wide, making speech harder to hear and understand," says Rezak. This subtle sign is so characteristic of Parkinson's that researchers are working on a voice analysis technique that might eventually be used as an early screening and diagnostic tool.

Arm doesn't swing freely

"Reduced arm swing" is how doctors describe this symptom, but that doesn't fully capture what some Parkinson's patients first remember noticing. Instead, think of this sign as a subtle stiffness and reduced range of motion: reaching for a vase on the highest shelf or stretching out to return a serve in tennis and noticing the arm won't extend as far.

"With the onset of Parkinson's, people begin to have what we call increased tone, which means the

muscles are stiffer and more limited," says Santamaria. "The arm just won't go where the brain tells it to go." Some people first notice this when walking, as one arm swings less than the other. One way to distinguish this symptom from arthritis or injury: The joints are unaffected and there's no pain.

Excessive sweating

When Parkinson's affects the autonomic nervous system, it loses its ability to regulate the body, which can cause to changes in the skin and sweat glands. Some people find themselves sweating uncontrollably when there's no apparent reason, such as heat or anxiety. For a woman, these attacks may feel much like the hot flashes of menopause. The official term for this symptom is hyperhidrosis.

This condition can also show up in the form of excessively oily skin or an oily scalp resulting in dandruff. Many Parkinson's sufferers also notice a problem with excessive saliva, but this is actually caused by difficulty swallowing rather than producing more saliva.

Changes in mood and personality

Experts aren't certain why, but there are a variety of related personality changes that come with Parkinson's, including pronounced anxiety in new situations, social withdrawal, and depression. Several studies show that depression, in someone who hadn't previously experienced it, was the first sign many Parkinson's patients and their families noticed, but at the time they weren't able to attribute it to Parkinson's.

Some people also experience subtle changes in their thinking abilities, particularly in concentration and the so-called "executive functions" that govern planning and executing tasks. The first sign of decline is loss of ability to multitask. "People who used to be able to do three or four things at once perfectly well find that they have to do one thing at a time or they can't keep it all straight," Rezak says. Some experts believe that thinking problems and mood issues go hand in hand -- that the sense of slipping mentally leads to anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and social withdrawal.