

# Falls and Parkinson's

**F**alling is something that affects many people with Parkinson's, but there are many things you can do to help lessen the risk.

This information sheet looks at some of the reasons why people with Parkinson's may experience falls, gives helpful tips on what you can do to prevent falling and lets you know which professionals you can turn to for further support.

Loss of balance and falling can be common in Parkinson's and the problem tends to increase over time.

Everyone's experience of Parkinson's is different so you may not have these difficulties, but it's still important to be aware of possible balance problems.

## Physical reasons for falling

### Freezing

Some people with Parkinson's fall because they have problems starting to move or they 'freeze' while they are moving.

Freezing is when you stop suddenly, and it can last for a few seconds or minutes. If this happens, you might feel as though your feet are stuck to the floor or that you can't move easily, which can make you feel unsteady.

This can increase your risk of falling over. If you have difficulty with your medication wearing off before your next dose is due, you might find freezing becomes worse.

**Find out more:** [see our information sheet \*Freezing in Parkinson's\*.](#)

As your Parkinson's progresses, your posture can change – you may become more stooped and your muscles may become more rigid.

“ I had no falls at all at first, but then I fell twice in quick succession. But these difficulties are small and don't seriously affect my wellbeing. ”

### **Caroline, diagnosed in 1999**

This inflexibility can increase your risk of falling, because it's more difficult for your body to move, and for you to protect yourself if you lose your balance.

This can be worrying or frustrating, but there are several things you can do to help overcome balance problems:

- It might be helpful to get into a rhythm when you walk. For example, you could try counting each step, marching on the spot, stepping over patterns on the floor, humming or singing to yourself. You might use a mantra such as 'walk tall' or 'stride out' to help you stay focused when walking.
- If you freeze while walking with a friend, they can help you get moving again by holding your arm. While they support your balance you can concentrate on moving again. They can also try putting their foot at a right angle in front of yours for you to step over it. Just make sure you raise your foot above theirs and remember not to step backwards, to avoid disturbing your balance.
- Try to concentrate and keep distractions to a minimum – avoid walking and talking at the same time if you can. If you do want to have a conversation, try pausing and touching something solid when you want to talk, such as a lamp post.
- If you need to change direction, try not to turn too quickly and don't pivot on the spot. It's better to slow down and take a few extra steps to walk around in a half circle. Try to imagine that your feet are following the numbers on the face of a clock. Always take your time.

### **General weakness**

People with Parkinson's can become much less active than they used to be, which can cause muscles to get weaker.

This weakness can be a major cause of falls – so it is important to stay as active as possible to help muscles and joints from getting stiff and rigid.

### **Parkinson's medication**

Blood pressure problems can be a side effect of most kinds of Parkinson's medication.

Problems with blood pressure can also be caused by a combination of age-related factors and can lead to dizzy spells and falls. If you've felt dizzy, or fallen because of dizziness, ask your GP or practice nurse to check your blood pressure both when you're sitting and standing, to see if it's too low.

Drugs used to treat other medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, can potentially make this problem worse, especially if you are losing weight or not eating and drinking as well as you used to. Make sure you let your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse (if you have one) know if you have dizzy spells or falls.

**Find out more:** see our [information sheet Low blood pressure and Parkinson's](#).

You can also avoid dizzy spells by making sure you're taking your medication as prescribed. If your drugs don't seem to be working as well as they used to, you might need your medication reviewed. Ask your specialist or Parkinson's nurse for advice.

Some dizzy spells can be avoided by you just taking your time. For example, when you have just sat up ready to get out of bed, allow your feet to dangle on the floor for a few minutes before you stand.

When sitting on a chair or bed you could also try marching your feet on the spot for a few minutes to 'rev-up' your blood supply. Then stand up slowly, but don't immediately walk away – stand for a while until you feel steady.

### **Hazards in and around your home**

There are many things in the home that could be hazardous and make you more likely to fall, including slippery floors, loose carpets and general clutter. Here are some tips on how to reduce hazards in the home:

- Try to clear away as much clutter as you can and arrange your furniture so that moving around is as easy as possible. If the furniture is heavy, make sure you ask someone to help you move it.

- Hand or grab rails may be useful in tight spaces, such as in toilets, bathrooms or by the stairs. Putting non-slip mats in the bathroom will also help.
- Always make sure your house is well lit.
- Apply strips of coloured tape to the edge of steps to reduce slipping and to make them more visible.
- Keep commonly used items close to hand and make sure you have contact numbers nearby in case of an emergency. You might prefer to change your telephone to a cordless model so that you can carry it with you.
- Try not to rush, even if the phone's ringing or there's someone at the door.
- If you're prone to falls, you might find a community alarm system really helpful. This involves wearing a small device that has a button to alert an emergency response centre, who will send someone to help you. Age UK runs this type of service and your local social services can provide details of other local schemes. These systems do carry a small cost.
- Floor coverings can sometimes be a hazard. For example, carpet patterns can be visually confusing. Speak to an occupational therapist or physiotherapist about applying strips of tape or plastic footsteps on the carpet. These can guide you in places you may be more likely to fall, such as a tricky turn on stairs, or in doorways.

## General advice

It's important to get help and advice about avoiding falls. If you have fallen over before, anxiety or fear of falling can increase the likelihood of it happening again.

Your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse can offer advice on how to avoid future accidents, or refer you to a physiotherapist or occupational therapist.

Though it might be tempting, try not to restrict all your activities to prevent falls, as this is likely to cause joint stiffness or muscle weakness. This can actually increase your chance of having a fall because your body won't be used to moving and maintaining its balance.

It's important to try to stay as active as possible and to exercise regularly to help you maintain your mobility and prevent falls.

**Find out more:** see our exercise DVD and booklet, *Keeping Moving*.

If you want to take part in leisure activities outside the home, an occupational therapist can give you advice about local help and facilities available that might make this easier for you.

Remember that as long as you take part in sensible activities, there is no reason to let the risk of falls stop you doing from what you want to do. Staying active and doing the things you enjoy will help you maintain your physical and emotional wellbeing.

## Equipment

You might find walking aids like a walking stick or frame helpful. Before you start using a walking aid, however, it is very important to get advice from a physiotherapist. Some walking aids are not always recommended for people with Parkinson's because they can make some muscles weaker and make you more prone to falling.

## Footwear

You might find some shoes better than others. Footwear with low heels or flat soles might be helpful. Try to avoid unsupportive shoes, such as floppy slippers. An occupational therapist or physiotherapist can give you advice about what shoes to wear and ways of making the places where you walk easier and safer to manage.

**Find out more:** see our information sheet *Clothing*.

## Hip protection

Some people have found that a hip protection system reduces the impact on their hips if they fall. This will help to prevent fractures.

These are pads, worn over the hips, that can be slipped into specially designed underwear. An occupational therapist or an orthopaedic department in a local hospital should be able to advise on where you can get these.

## Professionals who can help

If you are experiencing falls, make an appointment with your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse to talk about what can be done to improve your safety and balance.

The following professionals can also help:

### Physiotherapists

A physiotherapist uses physical treatments, including exercise, to prevent or reduce stiffness in joints and to help build muscle strength and mobility. They can show you exercises to help maintain your posture and balance and can advise you on ways of preventing or reducing your risk of falling. They can also teach you ways to get up after having a fall, which will help you stay confident and independent. A physiotherapist can also advise or train family and carers on safe ways of helping you with any mobility problems.

Your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse will usually be able to refer you to a local physiotherapist. Alternatively, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy has a register of private physiotherapists who specialise in the treatment of neurological conditions, including Parkinson's.

**Find out more:** [see our information sheet \*Physiotherapy and Parkinson's\*](#).

### Occupational therapists

An occupational therapist can help you stay independent by talking to you about any problems you might have with everyday tasks and activities. They can help you find ways to make these as safe and easy as possible.

For example, an occupational therapist can help make your home and workplace safer and more manageable. They can give advice about appropriate aids and equipment, such as fixing extra hand rails by steps, stairs and in the bathroom.

An occupational therapist can also help you find different ways of doing everyday things like fastening buttons, eating or cooking. Plus, they can provide advice on ways to continue working and joining in with social and leisure activities.

Occupational therapists can be contacted directly in some areas through your local social services or social work department, or by referral through your GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse.

“My sense of balance is poor, and I walk with a stick. I am extremely slow in walking anyway. At home I rely on the proximity of walls, doorways and furniture to move around, but I sometimes misjudge and overbalance.”

**JC, diagnosed in 2006**

**Find out more:** [see our information sheet \*Occupational therapy and Parkinson's\*](#).

### Parkinson's nurses

Parkinson's nurses provide expert advice and support to help you manage your symptoms. They can also act as a liaison between other health and social care professionals to make sure your needs are met.

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

### Information and support workers

Our information and support workers can also provide information about and links to your local services.

For details of your local information and support worker in your area, contact our helpline on **0808 800 0303** or email **hello@parkinsons.org.uk**. You can also find out more on our website at **parkinsons.org.uk/isw**

### Fitness instructors

The more fit and active you are, the better your body is able to respond to the demands placed on it, making you less likely to fall and injure yourself.

In parts of England, you can be referred for a fitness review through the Exercise Referral Scheme, and see a fitness instructor who can tailor a programme to your individual needs. This is an initiative run by the Department of Health. Your GP will be able to refer you.

Similar schemes operate in parts of Scotland and Wales – your GP may be able to tell you about schemes available in your area.

The scheme also gives you reduced fees at a gym. Several gyms are signed up to the Inclusive Fitness Initiative, which ensures that they provide an accessible environment for everyone, including providing adapted equipment for people with disabilities. Visit [www.inclusivefitness.org](http://www.inclusivefitness.org) for more information.

## More information and support

### Age UK Aid-Call Service

Call **0800 77 22 66**

Visit [www.ageuk.org.uk](http://www.ageuk.org.uk)

### The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

Call **020 7306 6666**

Visit [www.csp.org.uk](http://www.csp.org.uk)

### Health & Safety Executive

This organisation has produced information on the prevention of slips and falls.

Call **0845 345 0055**

Visit [www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)

### Inclusive Fitness Initiative

Visit [www.inclusivefitness.org](http://www.inclusivefitness.org)

### The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (ROSPA)

This organisation publishes a number of leaflets about the prevention of accidents

Call **0121 248 2000**

Email [help@rospa.co.uk](mailto:help@rospa.co.uk)

Visit [www.rospa.org.uk](http://www.rospa.org.uk)



## Thank you

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

**Ana Aragon, Dip COT Specialist Occupational Therapist for Parkinson's Disease, Bath and North East Somerset PCT**

**Bhanu Ramaswamy MCSP, Independent Physiotherapy Consultant, Sheffield**

**Liz Scott BA (Hons), RGN Parkinson's Disease Nurse Specialist, Buckinghamshire Hospitals NHS Trust**

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



---

## Falls and Parkinson's

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 [Information Resources Team, Parkinson's UK, 215 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 1EJ](#). Or you can email us at [publications@parkinsons.org.uk](mailto: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?

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> GP, specialist or Parkinson's nurse | <input type="checkbox"/> Information and support worker |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Parkinson's UK local group or event | <input type="checkbox"/> Ordered from us directly       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Our website                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Other .....                    |

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) \*calls are free from UK landlines and most mobile networks.

Visit parkinsons.org.uk Email hello@parkinsons.org.uk

How to order our resources

Call 01473 212115 Email resources@parkinsons.org.uk Visit parkinsons.org.uk/publications

We make every effort to make sure that our services provide up-to-date, unbiased and accurate facts. We hope that these 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

Last updated December 2010. Next update available December 2012. FS39

© Parkinson's UK, December 2010. Parkinson's UK is the operating name of the Parkinson's Disease Society of the United Kingdom. A charity registered in England and Wales (258197) and in Scotland (SC037554).



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

What aspects did you find most helpful? .....

Were you looking for any information that wasn't covered? .....

Do you have any other comments? .....

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 .....