

Exercise May Help Parkinson's Patients Avoid Falls



Parkinson's disease patients are known to be at a higher risk of falling, due to the changes in the brain caused by the disease. A recent study found that exercise may be beneficial in preventing future falls.

Researchers found that 25% of recently-diagnosed Parkinson's patients suffer a fall in their first year of living with the disease. The finding is a surprise because one would think falls would increase during later stages of the disease.

Furthermore, other statistics showed that more than 70% of patients who had lived with the disease for 16 years had suffered falls.

"You are at more risk of falling if you have already had a fall. That's why it's important to take falls seriously, particularly at an early stage of the disease," the author of the research, Ylva Hivand Hiorth, PhD, of Stavanger University Hospital, in Norway, said in a news story. The findings are from her doctoral thesis.

Parkinson's causes some people to struggle with walking and sustaining balance, while others might experience tremors or rigidity of the muscles. The disease affects about 1% of the world population who are more than 60 years old, according to the news story. In people 70 and older, the number rises to 4%. Estimates show that prevalence might double by the year 2030, as life expectancy increases.

Hiorth established not only that falls at early Parkinson's stages are fairly common, but she also identified the risk factors that reveal who is more likely to suffer an early fall.

One way to incorporate her risk factor findings would be to classify the disease into sub-groups with similar dominating symptoms. Hiorth found that those who belong to the sub-groups not dominated by tremors often are at higher risks of falling at an early stage of the disease.

"We have found that 'established fallers' are more difficult to help. Our hope is that the earlier we can intervene, the more we can do to prevent falls," Hiorth said.

Moreover, while dopamine-replacement medication can suppress some symptoms, it does not prevent falls. So, what can? Hiorth believes that, in combination with new medicines, exercise could be a game-changer.

For instance, one study showed that tai chi, a gentle Chinese martial art, could help Parkinson's patients achieve good results in preventing falls. Routines that strengthen the lower limbs also can help, as well as balance-boosting exercises such as yoga or pilates.

"The most important investment someone can make is to find a type of exercise that they enjoy," she said.

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The trick is not to let the disease make you less active; however, the activity should be adapted to how you feel and your limitations.

Hiorth suggested that another alternative would be for patients to be allowed to stay in hospitals' rehabilitation wards, which is not common practice, but might become increasingly popular if research can demonstrate the benefits.

"If we manage to prevent early falls, this will give patients living with Parkinson's a better life and the confidence to stay as active as possible," Hiorth added.

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A post titled "Exercise Helps Parkinson's Patients Improve Coordination, Avoid Falls" originally appeared on ParkinsonsNewsToday.com.

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