Health Basics A-Z

Parkinson’s Disease

WHAT IS PARKINSON’S DISEASE?

Parkinson’s disease is part of a group of conditions that affect the movement of the body. The disease gets progressively worse and can lead to severe disabilities in some individuals.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PARKINSON’S DISEASE?

The first signs of Parkinson’s may be barely noticeable. A feeling of weakness or stiffness in one limb or trembling of one hand at rest may be the only signs. The main symptoms of Parkinson’s include tremor in the arms, legs and face. Rigidity or stiffness of the limbs and trunk, along with slowness of movement (called bradykinesia) are defining symptoms of the disease. Additionally, balance and coordination worsen with time.

WHAT CAUSES PARKINSON’S DISEASE?

Parkinson’s is caused by a gradual deterioration of nerve cells in the midbrain where movement is controlled. The disease develops when the cells of the basal ganglia, a group of structures in the brain that require two substances known as neurotransmitters (dopamine and acetylcholine) to function properly, begin to degenerate and stop producing dopamine. This throws off the balance between the two neurotransmitters.

Researchers believe that there is a genetic component to Parkinson’s, but in the majority of cases the cause remains unknown.

HOW IS PARKINSON’S DISEASE DIAGNOSED?

Currently, diagnosis of Parkinson’s is based on medical history and a neurological exam. Labs and blood tests do not help to make the diagnosis. Doctors may order brain scans and lab tests to rule out other diseases.

HOW IS PARKINSON’S DISEASE TREATED?

There is no cure for Parkinson’s, but several medications can help. Amantadine and levodopa combined with carbidopa may help to alleviate symptoms. Another group of meds called anticholinergics may help to control balance and rigidity. Also, in 2006 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved rasagiline to be used with levodopa for advanced Parkinson’s and to be used alone for early Parkinson’s.

But surgery may be appropriate in cases in which the disease does not respond to drug therapy.

The FDA has also approved a nondrug therapy called deep brain stimulation (DBS). This mode of therapy reduces the need for levodopa and related drugs. DBS helps control involuntary movement, a common side effect of levodopa. Additionally, DBS decreases tremors, slow movement and walking problems

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