Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's disease causes a slow decline of some of the nerve centers in the brain. The problems (*symptoms*) of the disease happen when the ratios of two signal transmitters in the brain (*dopamine* and *acetylcholine*) are not in balance. Medications can be given to restore the relationship of dopamine and acetylcholine.

CAUSES

Parkinson's disease is caused by depletion of the brain nerve transmitter dopamine. Infection, poisoning, and certain medications can be causes. But the cause is often not known.

SYMPTOMS

This disease usually starts in middle or late life. It develops very slowly. An early symptom of Parkinson's is often an uncontrolled pill rolling tremor of the hands. The thumb and index finger rub together. The tremor often will disappear when the affected hand is consciously used. Walking, talking, getting out of a chair, and new movements become more difficult as this disease progresses. Later, memory and thought processes may deteriorate.

DIAGNOSIS

Other conditions can resemble this disease. Special tests may be needed to evaluate your problem completely and establish the diagnosis. These tests include MRI or CT scans.

TREATMENT

No treatment is usually needed early in the disease. But it tends to get progressively worse. No medicines stop the progression. There are medications for treatment as the disease progresses. These can have side effects. The medications are not usually prescribed until the symptoms are troublesome. Levodopa and carbidopa (Sinemet, Dopar, Larodopa) are prescribed to increase the amount of dopamine in the brain. Other medicines used to treat this disease include amantadine, bromocriptine, and Eldepryl. The treatment relieves symptoms. It can make movement and balance better and help control the tremor. But it does not slow down the progression of the disease. Sometimes surgical treatment of the brain can be done in young people. Other treatments include transplantation in the brain of tissues that can make dopamine. Transplantation of fetal tissue has also been done with variable results.

Regular exercise and rest periods during the day help prevent exhaustion and depression. Keeping a positive mental attitude helps a great deal, too.

There is still no medication or treatment that stops the progression of this disease. Earlier treatment will not shorten the length of the illness. But treatment allows patients to continue with daily activities for many years.

For more information:

- Call your caregiver.
- Call the National Parkinson's Foundation at 1-800-433-7022. Web site: www.parkinson.org/

Document Released: 12/15/2001 Document Re-Released: 11/30/2009
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