TIP SHEET

Assistive Devices & Home Health

Our self-worth and -esteem are frequently tied to our ability to take care of ourselves, and the sense of independence this implies. We might not realize this connection until it becomes hard to perform some tasks that used to be simple – buttoning a shirt or cutting food into small pieces, for example. Many people who need assistance refuse it at first because of the loss of independence and accompanying impact on their state of mind.

However, there are simple changes, adaptive equipment, and even home care, that can help you or your loved one with Parkinson’s engage in activities, stay safe, and maintain independence. This fact sheet features information about these strategies, but it is not intended to replace the services and recommendations of a physical or occupational therapist.

As you read this, there are a few things to keep in mind:

» Expert care saves lives. If you can, it is recommended that you see a movement disorders specialist at least once a year. Your doctor can refer you to occupational and physical therapists who will evaluate you and help you get the best assistive device for your needs in the method best for insurance reimbursement.

» With Parkinson’s, many activities take longer. Build extra time into your schedule, so you can complete the tasks without rushing.

» Some assistive devices are covered by insurance, but many are not. For example, Medicare will pay for a wheelchair, but only once. Timing the purchase is therefore critical due to the progressive nature of the disease. If you choose to get a wheelchair right away, it is important to work with an experienced health care professional to project future needs; if you need a different type of chair at a later date, that will be your financial responsibility.

» Always get a prescription for assistive devices and even changes to your home (yes, this means construction – adding grab bars in the bathroom, installing a ramp to your front door, etc.). You can take a deduction on your taxes if you have a written prescription from your physician.
BATHROOM

A significant number of falls with injury at home happen in the bathroom. The hard surfaces of the toilet, tub, and sink are obstacles that can be dangerous if you lose your balance.

**Grooming**

Balance is necessary for most bathroom activities. While you can sit for grooming and some hygiene activities, most bathrooms are not big enough for a chair or stool. If your toilet is close to the sink, you may be able to sit on the closed toilet seat to comb your hair, brush your teeth, apply makeup, or shave. If you do that, it is helpful to get a toilet safety rail (such as a Versaframe, see image) that has armrests to support you as you sit down and stand up. A retractable mirror can be mounted on the wall near the toilet if you cannot see the bathroom mirror as you sit. This way you can use both hands for tasks.

If the toilet is not close enough to the sink and there is no room for a chair in the bathroom, it is best to perform hygiene activities in a room where you have more support. For example, you can bring the materials you need to the kitchen and sit at the table. Another option is secure a strap around the mid buttocks region to help keep you upright while you brush your teeth, shave, etc. This can be done by installing a large **eye bolt** (1) on either side of the sink and attaching the strap to the eye bolts with a **carabiner** (2). This gives support and freedom to use both hands. (NOTE: This can also be done in the kitchen to help with food preparation and washing dishes).

In addition to modifications for balance, there are devices that can help with grooming activities. Built-up handles, weighted handles, and wrist weights can be added to help slow and decrease any tremor you may have. **Electric toothbrushes** (3) and razors help reduce the amount of effort needed to brush and shave. Try different sizes to find the device with the right size and weight for you.

Unfortunately, there are not many modifications to help with the specific fine motor coordination needed to apply makeup, so you should be particularly careful when applying eyeliner and mascara.
**Showering**

Balance issues can make bathing a challenge. Use a rubber, non-slip mat both inside and outside the shower to decrease falls risk. A shower chair (4) or tub bench (5) is a good investment even for healthy individuals. Warm water relaxes your muscles. While this can be a pleasant sensation, relaxed movements can put you at risk for a fall. Grab bars can be placed both inside and outside the shower to help as you get in and out. A tub bench (rather than chair) also makes it easy to transition.

A washcloth or wash mitt (6) is helpful for bathing, so you don’t have to hold onto a slippery bar of soap. However, be careful when wearing the wash glove, as it can make it difficult to hold onto a grab bar. Instead, sit on the shower chair as you use the washcloth or glove.

For drying off, hang your towel on a hook inside the shower or just outside it, so it is easy to reach when you’re ready.

**Toileting**

To make getting on and off the toilet easier, place an elevated seat (7) on the toilet. Grab bars (8) or a commode frame (9) provide sturdy armrests. This can be helpful to hold onto before pivoting to sit down and when standing up during the process of hygiene/wiping and clothing adjustment. A health care professional, such as an occupational therapist, can help you choose which option is best and teach you how to use it safely.

The 3-in-1 commode (10) converts to a toilet frame, raised toilet seat, or shower chair and can also be used by the bed if nighttime trips to the bathroom become frequent or challenging. This is usually covered by insurance if you have a prescription.

DRESSING

There are a few things to consider when getting dressed:

» If you have a balance issues, you may want to get dressed sitting down, or even laying on the bed.

» Take the time necessary to get fully dressed, without rushing. If you rush, there is a potential for falls, especially as you are dressing the lower extremities (legs and feet).

» It is helpful to dress your most affected side first. For example, if your right side is more stiff, put your right arm into the shirt first, followed by the left.

» Looser clothing allows more freedom as you get dressed.

» Velcro and zippers are easier to use than buttons. You can replace button or hook closures with Velcro (11), or buy adaptive clothing designed for easier dressing.

Upper Extremity

It may be easiest to sit down as you dress the upper extremities (arms and torso). Overhead is the usual approach for t-shirts, sweatshirts, and polo shirts. Be sure that you have the necessary range of motion to put the shirt on over your head. If you have balance problems, take care not to raise your arms too far past your head to avoid a fall.

Button-down shirts can be easier to put on because they require a smaller range of motion (no overhead), but the buttons can be challenging, particularly the small buttons at the collar. Button aids (12) can help; some have a weighted or built-up handle for a better grip. A few companies also sell dress shirts with magnets hidden under decorative buttons to make dressing more efficient.

Note for women: There are a few strategies you can use to put on a brassiere: 1) Leave it hooked and pull it overhead; 2) hook it in the front, then slide it around so the front is where it needs to be; 3) replace hooks with extra strong Velcro, which can be found at any Walmart or similar store. You can also buy a bra with a front hook or wear a sports bra that you can pull overhead.

Equipment available at www.ncmedical.com
Lower Extremity

Because it requires bending over, dressing the lower extremities can be trickier than the upper extremities. Depending on how well you balance, you may choose to dress while standing, sitting, or lying down. Many people find it easiest to put on underwear and pants while lying down, then sit up for socks and shoes. When lying in bed, bring your legs up toward your chest to put on underwear. Lying down lets you roll from side to side as needed to pull up the underwear and pants.

Straps or suspenders can be used to pull (and keep) up pants. As the disease progresses, some people choose to wear sweatpants and other loose-fitting, soft, stretchy garments that provide more space as you put them on and move around.

There are several items that can help as you put on socks and shoes, including sock aides (13), long-handled shoehorn (14), and “lace locks” - elastic shoelaces that allow for tightening without tying (15).

It is usually helpful to sit while putting on and taking off socks and shoes, though be careful with the forward bend if there is a balance issue.

Equipment available at www.ncmedical.com and www.pattersonmedical.com
BEDROOM

There are several considerations when making the bedroom safe for someone with Parkinson’s. First, there should be enough space to move around the room, and any throw rugs should be removed, as they are a tripping hazard. A sturdy chair can be helpful for seated activities, such as dressing and self-care. Rockers and recliners work if they can be locked in place. Otherwise an armchair is best.

You might need to adjust the height of the bed with furniture risers (16) to make it most convenient for getting in and out. If the bed is too low, you may have difficulty and need assistance. You should be able to back up to the bed and put your hands down for support when sitting on it or getting in. The same is true for getting up from bed, using your hands to push up from the bed itself. “Nose over toes” is the mantra for rising out of a seated position: bend forward so your nose is over your toes, push off using your hands (pushing off the bed if seated there, or armrests if seated in a chair), and rise.

If a caregiver is going to assist with standing, pulling up on a belt at the waist is acceptable. A gait belt (17) can be used if the person with Parkinson’s does not wear a belt. Do not grab belt loops, as they can tear from the pants. Another option for the caregiver to assist is by lifting the person with Parkinson’s from under the arms. Do not grab hands or forearms, and be careful not to dig into the underarm. These tips work for helping the person with Parkinson’s stand up from either the bed or a chair.

*Equipment available at www.ncmedical.com*
KITCHEN

Many therapists suggest reorganizing the kitchen to place the most commonly used items – such as plates, cups, certain pots, etc. – on the counter at height that is easily within reach (this also applies to the refrigerator, where frequently consumed items should be kept on the middle or top shelves).

Another common expression is to use wheels whenever possible to assist with moving items from one room to another.

Meal Preparation

Planning is key! Gather all the ingredients and utensils you might need before you start cooking. This will save energy and reduce the number of trips back and forth across the kitchen.

Care must be taken when cutting during meal prep. Sharp knives can be hazardous, due to tremor that many people with Parkinson’s experience.

» Adaptive cutting boards (18) have built-up sides and pins in them to help keep items in place when cutting.

» Weighted knives (19) can decrease tremor and allow for more normal usage. Electric knives can also help.

In general, utensils with built-up handles (20) are easier to grasp for meal preparation and dining. A simple way to build up handles is to use pipe insulation in tube form. You can find this in a hardware store.

Another good kitchen tool is a pot stand (21). These have suction cups on the bottom to stick to the counter and are helpful for pouring and mixing.

Cooking Appliances and Environment

As long as you have space, all major appliances can be moved and put in a place that is easier to reach, and raised or lowered to be at the appropriate height. Microwaves now have the ability to be in a drawer and built into cabinets. Work surfaces can be in a cabinet and brought out as needed if the commonly used items take up too much space on counters.

Equipment available at www.wisdomking.com and www.pattersonmedical.com
Washing Dishes

Many stores sell dishwashing brushes that have soap already in them. You can also use a wash mitt, similar to what was mentioned above in the Bathroom section. When using a dishwasher, newer products have higher shelves and/or multiple racks, so you do not have to bend all the way down to the lower rack.

Dining

There are many options for adaptive utensils, including those with built-up handles, weights, and swivels. As mentioned above, foam pipe insulation (22) can be cut and applied to any utensil. You might want to keep a separate set that you bring to restaurants, to make dining out easier. Swivel utensils (usually spoons) help avoid spills when you scoop up your food. A newer technology is the Liftware device (23) which has a stabilizing handle to counteract tremor, steadying the hand. It is available with spoon and fork attachments. While it is a more expensive option, it can make it easier to scoop up food and bring it to the mouth.

The National Parkinson Foundation is part of the Liftware donation program for people who cannot otherwise afford the device. If you are on Medicaid and think you could benefit from the device, call the National Parkinson Foundation toll-free Helpline at 1-800-4PD-INFO (473-4636) and talk to one of our PD Information Specialists about whether the device is right for you.

Dycem (24) is a non-slip material you can cut to size and put under a plate or bowl to keep it from moving on the table. A plate guard (25) can help if you have trouble getting food onto your spoon or fork; it is a 1” acrylic or metal border that fits on most plates. You push the food up against the guard, and it falls onto the utensil.

Equipment available at www.wisdomking.com and www.pattersonmedical.com
HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES

Many household activities can be simplified with basic planning and preparation. For example, gather all the materials needed for an activity before beginning, whether it is brushing your teeth, cooking a meal, or other task.

If you have a bothersome tremor, try wearing a wrist weight (26) of 1-2 pounds on the side with tremor. This can help decrease tremor while you go about your activities.

If balance is a problem, be careful when vacuuming and cleaning the house, and elevate sofas and appliances - such as the washer and dryer - so you don’t have to bend over or reach too far.

LEISURE ACTIVITIES

Exercise is medicine for people with Parkinson’s, so it is important to stay active as long as you can. Exercising and socializing are good for you both physically and mentally! There are many adaptations you can implement to help you continue doing the activities you love. For example, there are golf carts (27) that you can sit and lean against to play and lift chairs (28) to help you get in and out of a pool. If you enjoy a sport that you do not think you can participate in anymore, try the virtual reality version, on Nintendo Wii, Xbox Kinect, or PlayStation Move. These allow the player to enjoy sports such as tennis, bowling, baseball, fishing, and hunting safely in the home environment.

ASSISTIVE DEVICE RESOURCES

The companies referenced on these pages are just a few of the many specialty suppliers that sell adaptive equipment. In addition, many items mentioned here are available from general retailers, such as Walmart (www.walmart.com) and www.amazon.com.

Golf and pool equipment available at www.solorider.com and www.spinlife.com, respectively
HOME CARE

Not everyone wants an extra hand, even when you really need it. It can be hard to accept this reality and deal with the emotions it brings up. However, as your needs change, you must continually reevaluate your need for help.

Parkinson’s progresses differently in every person, and it can be hard to plan for help when you don’t know what each day or hour will hold. But if you put off getting help for too long, you might begin to feel overwhelmed, and you put yourself at risk for injury. At first you might just need someone to help with housekeeping or pick up groceries every now and then. As the disease advances, your needs might evolve to include meal planning, personal hygiene assistance, or more.

Where to Find Help

Getting outside help does not necessarily mean hiring services through a home care agency or private in-home caregiver. If you are comfortable asking for help, discuss your needs with your care partner, family, or friends to see how they might be able to assist you. Take advantage of your network and the kindness of others, but accept limitations and consider having several options, or a back-up plan if your regular assistance is unable to help. Eventually you might consider hiring a home health aide to take care of some tasks.

What to Look for When Hiring a Caregiver

So you can select the right type of aide, first think about the tasks you need help performing. The amount and type of support you need will determine the type of caregiver you should hire as well as how much it will cost. In-home care can be expensive, so you will need to budget for this or explore what financial help you might qualify for. The Veterans Administration covers some costs for former servicemen.

When hiring, be clear about the level of assistance you require. For example, if you need the caregiver to help with bathing or incontinence care, ask if those services are available. Similarly, if you need the aide to administer medications or perform any skilled nursing procedures, it is particularly important to ask if the caregivers are qualified to perform these tasks.

To assess whether a particular individual or agency would be a good fit for you, refer to our tip sheets “Questions to Ask a Potential Paid Individual Caregiver” and “Questions to Ask a Potential Agency Caregiver,” available by calling the NPF Helpline at 1-800-4PD-INFO (473-4636) or online at www.parkinson.org/library.
Preparing Paid Caregivers

First, it is important for anyone you hire to be familiar with Parkinson’s disease, so they can best understand, and even anticipate, your needs. You can refer home aides to the National Parkinson Foundation toll-free Helpline at 1-800-4PD-INFO (473-4636). Our PD information specialists are trained allied health professionals and can answer your questions about the disease, treatments, and care, as well we direct you to resources that can help.

Once they know about the disease, help the person you hire get to know you: your history, personality, and preferences. Together, you can then develop a care plan.

For more tips on working with a home aide, refer to the worksheet “Orienting a New Home Care Worker,” available at www.parkinson.org/library.

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For other tip sheets and caregiver support information, order the NPF book Caring and Coping.