

## PD & Freezing

“Freezing” is a word you may hear when people with Parkinson disease (PD) talk about trouble they have when walking. They are referring to a poorly understood and frustrating phenomenon in which people have trouble starting a movement or are suddenly, and for a short time, unable to continue walking. Even though they want to move, people feel their feet are “glued” to the ground or are “frozen” for several seconds (or, more rarely, a minute or two). Some people experience a trembling in their legs or have small, frequent shuffling steps before they “freeze”.

### When does freezing happen?

Freezing when walking (“freezing of gait”) is usually experienced by people who have had Parkinson disease for a number of years; though not everyone who has PD will develop freezing. It is often seen with other changes in walking, such as slow, shuffling steps with the feet close together.

Freezing can happen in a variety of situations, such as:

- starting to walk (called “start hesitation”)
- walking in open areas
- walking in crowded or cluttered spaces
- approaching a doorway
- moving toward a chair to sit down (called “target hesitation”)
- starting to turn
- entering or exiting an elevator
- getting on or off an escalator
- a change in the walking surface (uneven to smooth or vice versa)

Freezing is possible, but less common, with speaking or with other types of movements such as writing, raising a cup to drink or brushing teeth.

### What causes freezing?

We don’t yet understand why people with PD sometimes freeze. Freezing is unpredictable and frustrating. It can lead to potentially dangerous situations including falling; and can be made worse if you are anxious or stressed.

Freezing can happen when you feel your medications are working well (you are “ON”), when your medications are not working well (you are “OFF”) or in both situations. Freezing is not the same as OFF time. OFF time lasts much longer than freezing episodes and is usually helped by taking medication. Very rarely, an increase in medications can make freezing better, but more often it doesn’t help at all.

### What can I do when I am frozen/stuck?

A number of strategies or “tricks” may help you get “unstuck” if you freeze. One or more of these tricks may work for you. A frustrating part of freezing is that what helps you move one time may not help you the next time. It is good to know a number of options, so if one doesn’t work, you can choose another.

**First:**

- STOP trying to walk. Take a deep breath. Look up. Look to where you want to go. Think about how you want to move.

**Then:**

- Think about taking BIG, LONG steps  
Imagine doing the action in your mind first, then try to start moving
- Say “left, right, left, right” as you move your left foot and then your right foot
- Gently rock from side to side (shift your weight)
- Step over something - the foot of your friend, a cane handle, an imaginary line
- Listen to music with a strong beat and step in time to the beat
- Count out loud, then step in time to your counting
- Lightly tap your thigh (front or back) as you try to move that leg forward
- Step backward first, then forward
- Take a step to the side, then step forward
- Sing or whistle and step in time with the music
- Raise your arms above your head, take a deep breath and then step

**Frozen/stuck while turning?**

- Try walking in a circle or wide arc instead of pivoting or turning sharply

**How can I help somebody who is “stuck”?**

If you are a companion of someone who has freezing, you may want to help by pulling on their arm to get them moving. This is not a good idea because it may push them off balance. Try this instead:

- Place your foot in front of their “frozen” foot and have them step over your foot
- Walk arm-in-arm with them (this may help avoid the freezing as you get in to a rhythm of walking together)
- Gently touch an elbow or shoulder, but without pushing or pulling
- You count, sing or say “left, right, left, right” out loud and walk in time to the beat

**Freezing and falls**

Freezing increases the risk of falling. Poor posture also increases the fall risk. If your posture is stooped, with your head forward and your hips and knees bent, your body will naturally want to move forward. If your feet are very close together and you suddenly freeze, falls are very common. So stand tall and think big!

**What other help is available?**

A consultation with a physical therapist familiar with PD may be helpful. The therapist can guide you in developing tools to help overcome freezing when it happens.

Remember to stop, breathe and think about moving BIG.