

ONE STEP AT A TIME



What Are The Benefits of Exercise?

Written By: Rachel Kubitz

The Benefits of Exercise:

Exercise is essential for everyone. Regular physical activity reduces the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, and osteoporosis. Beyond physical health, exercise boosts mental well-being by releasing feel-good chemicals a great way to meet new people, make friends, and connect with others with similar interests. No matter a person's age or ability, moving regularly has benefits both physically and mentally.

How Exercise Helps People with Parkinson's Disease

Exercising with Parkinson's can understandably seem like a daunting task. These feelings are valid when navigating a condition like Parkinson's. However, research shows that people with Parkinson's who stay active experience improved symptoms. In addition, new research is also showing that exercise may help slow the progression of Parkinson's disease. Physical activity plays a crucial role in managing Parkinson's by improving both motor and non-motor symptoms. Although it may feel overwhelming to start, incorporating a mix of strength training, aerobic exercise, flexibility, balance, and mental health focused activities can significantly benefit anyone with Parkinson Disease.

Strength Training

Practicing strength training exercises improves muscle strength and can allow you to feel more confident and capable in your movement. You or your loved one may be experiencing muscle weakness or struggle with coordination. These symptoms can make tasks like standing up from a chair or climbing stairs difficult. Exercises focused on building muscle strength like sit-to-stand squats strengthen the legs, making it easier to get up from a seated position. You may also feel discouraged to workout due to a fear of falling. With Parkinson's, instability or balance issues are common. Incorporating core strengthening exercises that focus on the abdominal, back and leg muscles can greatly improve stability and increase self-confidence. With consistency and practice, strength training can help improve many symptoms you may be facing.

Aerobic Exercise

Aerobic exercise (also known as cardio), like walking, cycling, or dancing, can help with symptoms such as poor sleep and apathy. Sleep can be especially challenging when living with Parkinson's. You might feel exhausted but still struggle to fall asleep or stay asleep, whether it is from discomfort, stiffness, pain, or needing to move in bed. Regular aerobic activity may help improve your sleep by helping you fall asleep faster, sleep more deeply, and feel more rested when you wake up.

Apathy (a loss of interest or motivation) can be harder to manage. It is common with Parkinson's and can make even small tasks feel overwhelming, especially if you are already dealing with low energy. Exercise will not fix apathy overnight, and it is not just about having more energy. But getting into a regular routine with aerobic movement, especially if you find a form you enjoy, might help shift your mood and give you a sense of accomplishment. Even small improvements in sleep or mood can make a difference in how you feel about taking that next step.

An additional benefit of aerobic exercise is that it can reduce constipation. Moving your body does indeed get everything moving... That includes your bowels and the contents inside them, making bowel movements easier and more frequent. Cardio is a great way to warm up your muscles before jumping into other exercises like strength training. However, if it is the only exercise you do, it is one of the best forms of movement to incorporate into your routine.

Flexibility and Balance Exercises

Flexibility and balance exercises are just as important as strength and aerobic activity. Parkinson's can cause stiffness, especially in the morning, making it harder to move comfortably. Light stretching can help loosen tight muscles, improve your range of motion, and make everyday tasks, like getting dressed or reaching for objects easier. Balance exercises can improve posture, stability, and coordination, which helps reduce the risk of falls. Over time, regular flexibility and balance training can support smoother, safer movement throughout your day.

These types of exercises also help with specific movement challenges that are common in Parkinson's, like freezing or shuffling steps. Practicing balance can make it easier to shift your weight from one foot to the other, turn more safely, or walk on uneven ground.

Flexibility work, especially when focused on the neck, shoulders, hips, and ankles, can improve the way you move during daily routines. Including these exercises a few times a week, even for a short time, can help maintain independence and make movement feel more natural.

Mental and Emotional Benefits

Exercise is not just good for your body, it can help your mind, too. Living with Parkinson's can come with a lot of emotional ups and downs. You might feel frustrated, anxious, or even down for no clear reason. That is completely normal. But moving your body, even a little, can help lift your mood. When you exercise, your brain releases chemicals like dopamine. These can help you feel more relaxed, more positive, and less stressed.

For example, if you are feeling isolated or stuck at home, going for a walk with a friend or joining a local fitness class can give you both movement and social connection. If you have been feeling low, something as simple as stretching, dancing to music, or riding a stationary bike can shift your focus and help you feel a little more like yourself again. Many people with Parkinson's also say that when they feel stressed, motor symptoms like tremors get worse. By creating a routine that is fun, exercise can help reduce stress and make you feel more in control of your day.

It does not have to be intense or perfect. Just moving your body in a way that feels good to you can go a long way in supporting your mental well-being.

Closing Thoughts

Incorporating regular exercise into your life can be one of the most powerful tools for managing Parkinson's. From improving strength, balance, and mobility to supporting better sleep, digestion, and emotional well-being, the benefits extend far beyond just physical fitness. New research is looking promising that exercise may help preserve dopamine producing structures in the brain, potentially slowing the progression of the disease and delaying the onset of symptoms. Building an exercise routine is about prioritizing the needs of future you. It is okay to start small, go at your own pace, and modify movements to meet your body where it is at daily. Whether you enjoy exercising alone, with a friend, in a group, or online, what matters most is that you keep moving in a way that feels good for you. You do not have to do it perfectly, just keep showing up for yourself, one step at a time.