

INDEPENDENT *living*

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5 Early Signs of Parkinson's Disease You Didn't know About

By Jeremy Scmitz, MD

Tremors, expressionless appearance, slow movements – if you ask someone to describe Parkinson's disease, they might start with these common symptoms.

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder — a condition where parts of your nervous system (especially your brain) deteriorate over time and cause progressively worse symptoms. The disease is perhaps most well-known for how it affects movement and muscle control.

However, there are many signs that aren't quite as well-known. Knowing these signs — particularly the earlier signs — is critical for early diagnosis. While there's no cure for Parkinson's,

there are many treatments to manage symptoms. Getting diagnosed early could mean having more treatment options or that the treatments might be more effective. It's also been suggested that early treatment could delay the onset of some symptoms.

Here are some of the lesser-known early signs that you may have Parkinson's disease:

1. Your handwriting is smaller than usual.

If your writing has been shrinking in size or becoming cramped, it might be due to Parkinson's. This is called micrographia. It's a hallmark of Parkinson's, and it's often among the

earlier signs.

Micrographia is caused by the brain damage that leads to other motor symptoms of Parkinson's. These symptoms, including tremors, slow movements, and rigidity, can also make the act of writing more difficult.

Once you've been diagnosed with Parkinson's, some of the medications you take to help control movements may improve your writing. You might also benefit from strategies like using lined paper and practicing writing a page once a day.

2. Your speaking voice has changed.

Voice and speech problems are common in people with Parkinson's — between 75% and 90% of people with Parkinson's develop these problems at some point. Difficulty speaking may be one of the first signs.

Speech changes can happen with Parkinson's because the disease causes the movements in your mouth, face, throat, and chest that you use to speak to become smaller and slower. Also, Parkinson's symptoms like changes in thinking can affect your speech by making it difficult to find the right word or start a sentence.

If you're having trouble speaking, you may find it helpful to work with a speech-language pathologist. Speech-language pathologists are experts at treating the voice and communication issues caused by Parkinson's.

3. You're losing your sense of smell.

Reduced sense of smell (hyposmia) is common with Parkinson's. It can cause difficulty detecting certain smells or problems distinguishing smells from one another. It can also lead to changes in your sense of taste. While hyposmia is not a sign that people are often familiar with at first, it's not uncommon for people with

Parkinson's to realize that they started losing their sense of smell years or even decades before their diagnosis.

The exact reason why Parkinson's affects smell has been debated. Recent research has shown that it may be due to problems in the olfactory bulb, which is the part of the brain that controls smell.

There isn't a treatment for hyposmia related to Parkinson's, but if it's affecting your taste and appetite, you may want to work with your provider on ensuring that you're still meeting all your nutritional needs.

4. You've been a bit backed up.

Constipation may be one of the more uncomfortable early signs of Parkinson's. Like hyposmia, it can start years before developing motor symptoms.

Parkinson's may cause changes in the nerve cells in your spinal cord and the wall of your intestines, slowing down the muscles responsible for pushing food through your digestive tract. Also, if Parkinson's has started to affect movement, you may be less physically active than you were before — and not getting enough physical activity is a known cause of constipation.

There are several ways to prevent constipation, such as:

- Drinking six or more 8-ounce glasses of water each day
- Eating smaller meals during the day
- Increasing the amount of fiber in your diet
- Reducing low-fiber starchy foods, like cookies or bread
- Getting more exercise
- Drinking warm beverages, particularly in the morning

Your provider might recommend occasionally using over-the-counter medications like stool softeners or laxatives, but they should not be used

every day for a long period of time.

5. You can't fall asleep.

A bout of insomnia (difficulty falling or staying asleep) is normal every now and then, and usually isn't cause for concern. But frequent insomnia could be a sign of a medical condition like Parkinson's.

In addition to insomnia, Parkinson's can cause a number of other sleep problems:

- Extreme sleepiness during the day
- REM sleep behavior disorder, which involves acting out — like yelling, punching, or getting out of bed — while you're asleep
- Interruptions in breathing when sleeping (sleep apnea)
- Discomfort in your legs while you're lying down that only gets

better with movement (restless legs syndrome?)

- Getting up often to use the bathroom

Fortunately, there are plenty of methods for improving sleep — from setting a consistent bedtime to avoiding certain foods right before bed to rethinking your sleep environment.

Having difficulty sleeping, or any of the other early signs, is hardly a guarantee that you have Parkinson's disease. You may have a different medical condition or simply be experiencing the effects of getting older. Before jumping to conclusions, let your provider know about your symptoms. Whether they're due to Parkinson's disease or something else, they can help you manage symptoms and stay healthy.



Allergies and Older Adults: Here's What's Different as You Get Older

By Stephanie Thurrott, Contributing Writer

Maybe you've been a loyal pet parent your entire life even though the dander makes your eyes a little itchy. Lately, though, it seems like your symptoms are get-

ting worse. Or you've lived through decades of allergy seasons without so much as a sneeze — until this year. Perhaps you develop an allergy to a medication you've taken for years.

“People are often surprised to learn that allergies can develop at any time in life — either because of a new allergy or a new exposure from moving to a new location,” said Lee Sommerfeld, DO, a family medicine specialist with Banner Health. Allergies can affect people of any age, and they may affect older people differently.

Allergies happen when your immune system reacts to substances (allergens) that are typically harmless to most people. Reactions could be mild, like sneezing and itching or severe, like anaphylaxis, which can cause trouble breathing and be life-threatening.

As you get older, your immune system changes. So you could develop new allergies or need different ways to manage allergies you’ve had for a long time.

Allergies can complicate other health conditions you may have, like asthma or heart disease. It can be harder for you to recover from severe allergic reactions when you’re older. And allergy symptoms may be more likely to be mistaken for something else in seniors.

Which allergies are common in older adults?

“Common allergies can include indoor allergies like dust or pet dander, or outdoor seasonal allergies including pollens,” Dr. Sommerfeld said. A lot of the allergens that strike younger people are common in seniors as well:

Pollen: Seasonal allergies caused by pollen from trees, grasses and weeds can lead to sneezing, nasal congestion and itchy eyes.

Dust mites: These microscopic creatures thrive in household dust and can be a problem in places where dust builds up easily. They can cause

sneezing, coughing and itchy skin.

Mold: Mold spores can be found in damp or humid indoor areas. They can lead to breathing issues, such as coughing and wheezing and can make conditions like asthma worse.

Pet dander: Allergies to dander from cats and dogs are common. They can cause itchy eyes, runny nose and trouble breathing.

Certain foods: Food allergies often start in childhood, but older adults can develop them too. Common culprits include shellfish, nuts and dairy.

Medications: Some older adults may become allergic to medications they have taken for years, or to new medications prescribed for them.

What older adults should know about allergy medications

Older adults can generally use many of the same allergy medications as younger people. But if you’re older, you should be aware of possible interactions or side effects. “Treatments can be systemic or focused on the specific symptoms,” Dr. Sommerfeld said.

Antihistamines: These medications help with sneezing, itching and runny nose. Common types include loratadine (Claritin), cetirizine (Zyrtec) and diphenhydramine (Benadryl). Older adults should be careful with antihistamines, since they may interact with medications like blood pressure treatments and sleep aids.

Nasal corticosteroids: These reduce inflammation in the nasal passages and include medications like fluticasone (Flonase) and budesonide (Rhinocort). Corticosteroids are generally safe, but they can interact with medications that affect the immune system or blood sugar levels, such as arthritis or diabetes medications.

Decongestants: These relieve nasal

congestion and include medications like pseudoephedrine (Sudafed) and phenylephrine. Decongestants can raise your blood pressure and interact with medications for high blood pressure, heart conditions and depression.

“Older adults should keep in mind that some over-the-counter (OTC) allergy medications can increase the risk of falls or over-sedation, particularly medications like diphenhydramine and other allergy medications that are not specified as nondrowsy. Even nondrowsy allergy medications can occasionally cause mild drowsiness, so you should take them with caution,” Dr. Sommerfeld said.

You should talk to your health care provider before you start taking any allergy medication, even OTC options. If you have other medical conditions, it can help to:

- Keep an updated list of all medications, including OTC drugs and supplements, to share with your provider.
- Carefully read labels and instructions on allergy medications so you’re aware of possible interactions and side effects.
- Watch for new symptoms or side effects after starting a new allergy medication.
- Fill all prescriptions at the same pharmacy, if possible. Pharmacists can review your medications for potential interactions and provide advice.
- Consider options like lifestyle changes or home remedies to manage allergies and help reduce the need for medications.

The link between hearing loss and allergies

Allergies can affect your ears’ structure and function. They can lead

to temporary hearing loss or make existing hearing problems worse.

They can cause:

Inflammation and swelling of the Eustachian tube, which connects the middle ear to the back of the throat. Blockage can cause fluid buildup in the middle ear, leading to temporary hearing loss and a feeling of fullness in the ear.

Inflammation in the middle ear due to your body’s response to allergens, such as pollen or dust mites. This may lead to symptoms like earache and muffled hearing.

Sinus congestion, which can lead to pressure changes and fluid buildup that affects hearing.

Worsening of pre-existing ear conditions like chronic ear infections (otitis media) or tinnitus.

You can take these steps to lower the impact of allergies on your hearing:

- Keeping indoor air clean with air purifiers and regular cleaning can help.
- Treat hay fever (allergic rhinitis) to reduce inflammation and congestion that can affect the Eustachian tube and middle ear.
- Visit an audiologist or ear, nose and throat (ENT) specialist to monitor and manage any hearing changes related to allergies and prevent complications.
- Stay hydrated and use nasal saline sprays to help keep nasal passages clear and reduce congestion and pressure on the ears.

The bottom line

As you get older, you can develop new allergies or changes in allergies you’ve had for a long time. Changes in your immune system mean your body may react differently to allergens.



Healthy Eating Tips for Seniors

A healthy diet begins with you and the daily food choices you make.

Feeding your body the right nutrients and maintaining a healthy weight can help you stay active and independent.

Eating well can also help you spend less time and money at the doctor, especially if you have a chronic condition, such as diabetes or heart disease.

The definition of healthy eating does evolve as we age. A 20-year-old body and a 60-year-old body have different nutritional needs. For example, as we grow older, our metabolism slows down, so we need fewer calories than before. Our body also needs more of certain nutrients the older we get. That means it's more important than ever to choose foods that give us the best nutritional value.

Explore the materials below to get tips on how to find the best foods for your body and your budget.

Here are 6 tips to help you find the best foods for your body and your budget.

1. Know what a healthy plate looks like

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has come up with a simple way to help people see what a day of healthy eating looks like. It's called MyPlate. The simple graphic shows exactly how the five food groups should stack up on your plate. These are the building blocks for a healthy diet.

2. Look for important nutrients. Eating a variety of foods helps us get all the nutrients we need. Aim for your plate to look like a rainbow—bright, colored foods are often the best choice! A healthy meal includes:

- Lean protein (lean meats, seafood, eggs, beans)
- Fruits and vegetables (think orange, red, green, and purple)
- Whole grains (brown rice, whole

wheat
pasta)

- Low-fat dairy (milk and its alternatives)

Choose foods that are high in fiber and low in sodium or salt. As you age, focus on important nutrients, such as potassium, calcium, vitamin D, and vitamin B12.



6. Stretch your food budget

Want to get the biggest nutritional bang for your buck? The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) can help you afford healthy food when you need it. Approximately 6.5 million low-income adults age 60+ rely on SNAP,

and the average older adult receives \$158 each month.

Visit NCOA's BenefitsCheckUp to see if the program can help you.

Another way to eat healthy: Try out a grocery or meal delivery service

Did you know grocery delivery services allow you to select your groceries online and have them delivered to your door, potentially helping you avoid impulse buys? And have you heard meal delivery services can drop off either healthy prepared meals or whole ingredients with unique recipes right at your home?

If you haven't tried out either service yet, consider learning more. While some grocery delivery services can be covered by SNAP benefits, the delivery fee is not. Meal delivery kits generally are not covered by SNAP at this time.

3. Read the Nutrition Facts label

The healthiest foods are whole foods. These are typically found on the perimeter of the grocery store in the produce, meat, and dairy sections. When you do eat processed foods like chips and baked goods, be a smart shopper! Read the labels to find items that are lower in fat, added sugars, and sodium.

4. Use recommended servings

Eating the right amount of food for your age and body helps you maintain a healthy weight. USDA's MyPlate Plan has some guidance on nutrition and daily activity specifically for adults age 60 and older.

5. Stay hydrated

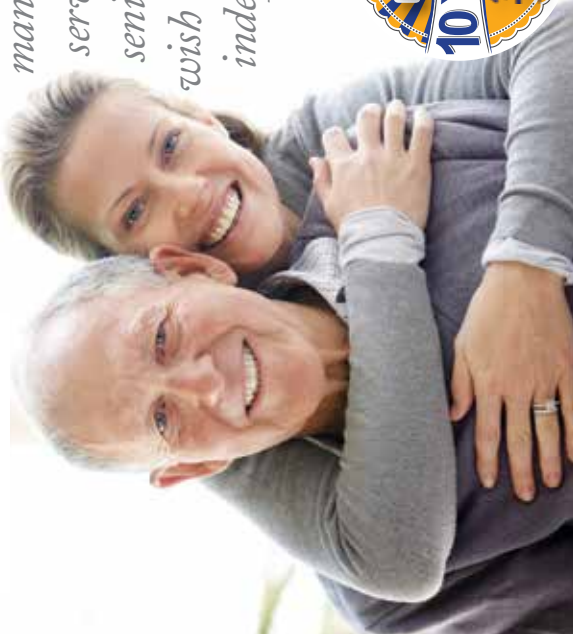
Water is an important nutrient, too! To prevent dehydration, drink small amounts of fluids consistently throughout the day. Water is your best choice. Keep fluids with sugar and salt at a minimum, unless your doctor suggests otherwise.

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