

Freezing is a word you may hear when people with Parkinson's disease 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 while walking ("freezing of gait") is usually experienced by people who have had Parkinson's disease for a number of years. Not everyone who has Parkinson's disease 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 (start hesitation);
- walking in open areas;
- walking in crowded or cluttered spaces;
- approaching a doorway;
- moving toward a chair to sit down;
- 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 Parkinson's disease sometimes "freeze". Freezing is unpredictable and frustrating. It can lead to potentially dangerous situations such as falling and can be made worse if you are anxious or stressed.

Certain persons may confuse freezing with the "OFF" phase of their medication. Freezing is not the same as "OFF" time. "OFF" time of medication treatment lasts much longer than episodes of freezing. Moreover, freezing can happen at any time, during "ON" or "OFF" phases. Please read our pamphlet Daily Living: Medication for more information on "ON" and "OFF" phases.

Usually, regular medication intake may bring some small improvement. In very rare cases, the increase of medication may decrease the freezing. Consult your physician for any question on this subject.



WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I AM FROZEN?

A number of strategies or tricks may help you get unstuck if you “freeze”. A frustrating part of freezing is that what helps you move one time may not help you the next time. Therefore, it is good to know a number of options: so that 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 first 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, 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” WHILE TURNING?

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



HELP SOMEBODY WHO IS “STUCK”?

If you are a companion of someone experiencing freezing, you may want to help by pulling on their arm to get them moving. This is not a good idea. It may push that person 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!

RESSOURCES

A consultation with a physical therapist familiar with Parkinson’s disease 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.

