HEALTH BULLETIN

How does Parkinson's disease progress?

PARKINSON QUÉBEC

If you have Parkinson's disease, or have just been diagnosed with it, you may be wondering how this so-called neurodegenerative disease will progress and how the symptoms that emerge will affect your life. These questions are justified. However, Parkinson's disease is rather unpredictable. In this regard, it is often said that there is not one standard Parkinson's disease but rather many variations of Parkinson's disease. Indeed, the evolution of this pathology varies enormously from one person to another. Some people will feel symptoms that others will never feel. Some will display the shaky form of the disease while others will have the rigid form. Others will experience a range of non-motor symptoms (loss of sense of smell, dementia, pain, etc.) while for others, these symptoms will not manifest themselves with such intensity. To add to the complexity of this disease, certain drugs work better for some people while for others it is another combination of drugs that will prove to be more beneficial to them. In other words, it is not easy to make predictions about the evolution of the disease.

What you can expect

However, some generalizations can be made. Even if this disease progresses differently from one person to another, it is certain that new symptoms will eventually appear as the disease evolves. Life expectancy is not necessarily affected by Parkinson's disease. However, it can greatly affect your quality of life. About 10 years after diagnosis, most people will have at least one major motor or non-motor symptom that affects them daily.

Motor symptoms

The significance of a symptom is relative. We can say that a slight tremor in your right arm may be a relatively minor symptom, but if you are right handed, this tremor is suddenly a bigger inconvenience.

During the early stages of the disease, the symptoms are bothersome but they do not prevent you from performing your daily tasks. You may notice one or more of the following symptoms:

- Arms that no longer move along your body while you walk;
- Inability to make certain facial expressions;
- Sensation of heaviness in the legs;
- General posture affected;
- Micrography;
- Rigidity in the arms or legs;
- The symptoms mostly affect one side of the body rather than both.

During the moderate stages of the disease (often between 3 and 7 years after diagnosis), additional changes can be observed. You will notice, among other things, some medications that you took that were effective, are less effective now or are no longer effective. You can expect to experience some of the following symptoms:

- Changes in speech (e.g., decrease in the intensity of the voice).
- Freezing episodes that affect the way you walk or change direction.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- More frequent falls.
- Trouble with balance or coordination.
- Slowness in the movements.
- Tendency to take very small steps (festination).

Some people never reach the conditions associated with the advanced stages of the disease. It is at this stage that the medication loses much of its effectiveness and motor and non-motor symptoms become very debilitating. At this stage, it may be that:

- You have to use a wheelchair;
- You are not 100% autonomous and need help with daily tasks;
- Your posture is greatly affected.

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Non-motor symptoms

Almost everyone with Parkinson's disease is affected by one or more of the following non-motor symptoms:

-Constipation; depression; loss of sense of smell; hypotension; pain; sleep problems; memory problems; difficulty staying focused just to name a few.

Dementia or psychoses can appear in advanced stages of the disease. The development of dementia depends on how long you have Parkinson's disease. However, as mentioned at the beginning of this health capsule, the disease unpredictable and complex. It is a difficult disease to understand and thus difficult to foresee the symptoms. The fact remains that by adopting efficient strategies and proper lifestyle habits, it is possible to exercise control over this disease and thereby, it is possible to maintain a good quality of life.

Source: WebMD Medical Reference, *How Parkinson's disease progresses*, Melinda Ratini, 2017, https://www.webmd.com/parkinsons-disease/guide/parkinsons-disease-progression#1

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