

Parkinson's Disease: Looking Toward the Positive

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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Actor Michael J. Fox might be the most well-known person with Parkinson's disease but he's far from alone. In fact, the Parkinson's Foundation says 90,000 people are diagnosed with Parkinson's disease each year in the U.S. with diagnosed cases increasing 50% between 2012 and 2022.

The Foundation estimates 1 million people in the United States are living with the neurodegenerative disease, with men 1.5 times more likely to have Parkinson's than women.

April is Parkinson's Awareness Month, a time to bring added attention to the disorder which impacts balance and coordination, while also causing shaking and stiffness.

The Michael J. Fox Foundation recently announced a biomarker breakthrough from an international group of scientists which will help diagnose. The tool, called the α -synuclein seeding amplification assay (α Syn-SAA), can detect the disease in spinal fluid not only of people diagnosed with Parkinson's, but also in individuals who have not yet been diagnosed or shown clinical symptoms of the disease, but are at a high risk of developing it.

Marc Katchen, M.D. is a neurologist with OSF HealthCare. He breaks down the signs to look out for when it comes to Parkinson's.

"For people who are concerned that they have a shake in the hands, they really have to say 'Am I moving slower? Am I having trouble getting up out of chairs? Can I not get out of my car very easily?' It's that slowness of movement to look out for," Dr. Katchen says. "Usually the family will notice the person is walking slower or not swinging their hands as much. Another sign is if someone's facial expressions have slowed down and they're a little more poker faced than normal."

Dr. Katchen says sometimes patients assume they have Parkinson's because of hand tremors, but that's not always the case. He adds symptoms of Parkinson's disease can appear up to 10 years before you have tremors.

"Some of the non-specific findings we see are constipation, depression and anxiety which can precede the tremor and slowness of movement. The essential tremor is a tremor people have when they're using their hands," Dr. Katchen says. "It can be when they're holding a cup of coffee, when they're trying to screw in a small bolt and their hand won't let them do that. That's not Parkinson's. With Parkinson's disease, their tremor is at rest. You can almost hear it, and it goes away with activity."

While there is no cure for Parkinson's, Dr. Katchen says that shouldn't make those diagnosed give up hope. He says exercise is a great way to increase overall quality of life.

"Get a program at home. Remember, therapy begins at home and it continues at home. There are programs like Rock Steady, which is a boxing program. There are also bicycling programs recently

developed,” Dr. Katchen says. “All exercise works. It improves almost 30%, it’s almost like an added medication. It’s something we can give patients and their families that they can control. So you don’t have to rely on a physician to give you a pill.”

While the average age of diagnosis for Parkinson’s is 60 years old, Dr. Katchen says younger people can get it too.

“Michael J. Fox is probably the best known example. Many young people will go to many different providers before they get a diagnosis, because no one is thinking about it and they think they’re too young. You can certainly be in your twenties and thirties with a new onset.”

In 1997, the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) approved Deep Brain Stimulation (DBS) surgery to treat Parkinson’s tremor. Dr. Katchen says this was groundbreaking for that time. Since then, the FDA approved the DBS surgery to treat advanced Parkinson’s symptoms.

Learn more about the Parkinson’s services offered at OSF HealthCare.