

HOW TO STAY SAFE AND IN YOUR HOME FOR LONGER

Q&A WITH DR. ROGER WONG

Over 90% of Canadians aged 65 and older stay in their homes and communities, according to Statistics Canada (2018). Among seniors in their 90s, about half lived in private households.

Dr. Roger Wong is Executive Associate Dean, Education in the Faculty of Medicine, University of British Columbia, a geriatrics specialist doctor, clinical professor of geriatric medicine, the 13th President of the Canadian Geriatrics Society, and a TEDx speaker. He was the British Geriatrics Society's 2017 Trevor Howell Guest Lecturer. He tweets at [@RogerWong10](https://twitter.com/RogerWong10).

Dr. Wong supports seniors, including people with Parkinson's and similar conditions, in living independently and safely in their own homes for as long as possible.

What is the difference between gerontology & geriatrics?

Many people confuse gerontology with geriatrics. Whereas geriatrics focuses on the medical conditions related to aging, gerontology is a multidisciplinary field that incorporates biology, psychology, and sociology. Geriatrics professionals are mainly found in healthcare, and gerontology professionals work in a variety of industries, including government, non-profits, and the business community.

Geriatrics doctors, or geriatricians, are medical doctors who specialize in the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of diseases and functional decline in older adults. Geriatricians are specially trained to look after the diverse health needs of seniors. An important aspect of geriatrics is evaluating an older person's ability to care for themselves and perform activities of daily living (e.g., commute, shop, prepare meals, bathe, dress, eat, and toilet).

How can a geriatrician help people living with Parkinson's?

With Parkinson's disease, daily function can be compromised by the symptoms of the disease. Geriatricians perform comprehensive assessments and develop customized care plans to support their patients in optimizing their daily function. Below are three strategies of a Parkinson's care plan to help people with the disease stay safe and in their home for longer.

Increase Safety

As you and your loved one age, it is important to increase safety in your home and neighbourhood. This means keeping your home safe from accidents, as well as getting to know the characteristics of your neighbourhood. This includes keeping your house clear from tripping and fall hazards, which can be done by keeping your home clean and decluttered, removing unnecessary rugs, coffee tables, and cords, and installing raised toilet seats, grab bars, and anti-slip bath mats. In your neighbourhood, staying safe may mean paying attention to uneven roads, curbs, and poor street lights.

To increase safety, you want to maintain and optimize function for yourself or your loved one. To do this you could get an in-home assessment with your local Home and Community Care office. A case manager (usually a nurse or occupational therapist) will come to your home and perform an assessment of your functional and environmental needs.

To increase safety, some people use technology, such as wearable devices, to help alert them of medication timing, and detect falls or unsafe wandering.

Maintain Activity

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines (2018) suggest that older adults (aged 65+) obtain approximately 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise per week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more. Exercise is of tremendous importance in the lives of those with Parkinson's; not only does it help to strengthen the body, but it has also shown to preserve function and slow disease progression.

There are many types of physical activity and exercise that one can do: walking, running, cycling, swimming, boxing, yoga, Tai Chi, etc. There are also mental (or cognitive) exercises that can help maintain brain and body health, such as playing cards, singing to your favourite oldies songs, doing puzzles, and participating in social events.

Get Socializing

Social contact involving family members, friends, neighbours, and acquaintances, is important for maintaining independence and establishing a support network. You and your loved ones should remember to spend time with other people apart from yourselves. Parkinson's can feel isolating in many ways, so it is especially beneficial to engage with your community. You can join a support group, an exercise class, go to educational events, and coordinate family gatherings. Socializing can also help you maintain activity in a safe way.

When should home safety be assessed?

Aging does not automatically mean moving into a care facility. Even seniors with Parkinson's who are in the early or moderate phase of the disease can live at home for longer than anticipated. The key is to prepare for old age, and act before it is too late.

If you notice that you are starting to have more difficulty around your home, call a local Home and Community Care office to get an in-home assessment.

How can I create a safe home?

Half of all falls that result in hospitalization occur at home. Safety in the home is key to allowing seniors to stay at home longer. Retrofitting and/or downsizing your home may be costly up front, but it could prove to be a wise long-term investment.

As a senior, you may be eligible for provincial and federal tax credits, such as the B.C. Home Renovation Tax Credit, Home Adaptations for Independence and the federal Home Accessibility Tax Credit. If you own your home, you may be eligible for the homeowner grant, which reduces property taxes paid on a principal residence. You can also defer all or part of your taxes to be paid with interest once the property is sold or the homeowner dies. For low-income seniors who are renters, you may be eligible for a rent supplement through the Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters (SAFER) program.

Here are some suggestions for improving your home safety:

- Reduce or eliminate stairs. Make sure outdoor stairs or decks have railings and good traction on surfaces.
- Remove tripping hazards such as rugs, cords and clutter.

- Create a well-lit home. Install switches at the top and bottom of stairs, night lights between the bedroom and bathroom, or motion-sensor lights.
- Install non-slip surfaces in the tub or shower. Consider using a bath seat and hand-held shower heads to allow for seated bathing. Install grab bars that are well-anchored to the wall in the bath or shower, or near the toilet seat.
- Discard furniture that feels loose or wobbly.
- Rearrange your cabinets and pantry so that commonly-used items are easy to reach. Install lower shelves to improve access.
- Program your cellphone with emergency phone numbers.
- Use an emergency personal response system like Lifeline or TELUS LivingWell Companion, which provide a button that can be worn around the neck or wrist that you can press to call for help.

Additional Resources

In-Home Safety Check | Parkinson Society BC | bit.ly/pdhomesafetycheck

Home & Community Care Services | Government of BC | bit.ly/homeandcommunitycare

Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines | Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology | bit.ly/cdnexerciseguidelines

Tax Tips for People with Parkinson's | Parkinson Society BC | bit.ly/taxtipsforpwp

Shelter Aid for Elderly Renters Program | bit.ly/bcsaferprogram

Lifeline Medical Alert Systems | www.lifeline.ca

LivingWell Companion | Telus Health | bit.ly/2DQiyOY

Sources

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