

YOUNG ONSET PARKINSON'S DISEASE

Young Onset Parkinson's disease (YOPD) is defined as a diagnosis of Parkinson's between the ages of 21 and 40, although some studies include subjects up to age 50. YOPD accounts for roughly 35% of all cases of Parkinson's. In YOPD, there is an increased risk of having an inherited form of Parkinson's, but this is still only a small proportion of YOPD.

Diagnosis

Compared with older people, who are often relieved when the diagnosis is finally made, younger people may have greater difficulty adjusting to the diagnosis. They are more likely to seek a second opinion from new doctors in hopes of finding different diagnoses. They may also be more likely to try unproven alternative treatments, to gather inconsistent information, and even reject future help from the physician who delivered their diagnosis.

Younger people also tend to rate their quality of life as worse than that of older patients of similar disease severity. People with YOPD often cite unusual fatigue as an early symptom.

Disease Progression

People with YOPD tend to experience a much slower progression of the disease, live longer with the condition, and experience motor fluctuations earlier. People with YOPD may not need treatment initially, but will need good medical care throughout their lives.

Cognitive Changes

YOPD is associated with less cognitive decline and a lower risk of developing dementia. However, it may include more mood, psychiatric, and behavioural symptoms in advanced stages. People with YOPD are at greater risk for developing anxiety, anger, and agitation. Depression is common in YOPD, and may not only be a symptom of Parkinson's, but rather precede the development of motor symptoms in some people.

Challenges in Daily Life

Due to the age of onset, people with YOPD are more likely to have marriage and employment difficulties, and may have to retire early due to disability. If the income of the person with YOPD is vital to the family budget, the family may face financial stress, which has more potential for causing marital strain. When paired with chronic illness, financial stress may be even more reason for couples affected by YOPD to look after their marriage and themselves.

Career and Identity

People with YOPD may have concerns relating to employment and careers. Career and finances contribute greatly to feelings of self-worth and identity. The decision to leave work is complicated by numerous factors, including:

- severity of symptoms
- amount of support in the workplace
- ability to delegate tasks if necessary
- need for precise hand movements
- need for manual labour and shift work
- safety issues and levels of fatigue
- voice volume and quality
- employment insurance benefit plans

Sexual and Reproductive Health

People with YOPD are affected at an age when they may expect, perhaps more than at other times, to be sexually active. The appearance of a person with Parkinson's (tremor, rigidity, loss of facial expression, and dyskinesia), can have an impact not only on their self-esteem, and their ability to feel sexually attractive, but also on the partner who may find these changes disconcerting.

Sexual function may not form part of a routine neurological examination, and the patient may have to be the one to mention it. While some find talking about sexuality challenging, it is important to do so, as there can be many avenues of treatment and therapy to explore, including counselling or medication.

Menstruation and Menopause

Younger women may report an increase in symptoms or drug side effects when they are premenstrual or menstruating. Perimenopausal women may also have difficulties with increased symptoms from time to time.

Pregnancy

Pregnancy may worsen symptoms, and may have a negative impact on the course of the illness. There is uncertainty regarding the effects of Parkinson's medications during pregnancy, and the drug levels found in breast milk. Deciding to become pregnant when living with YOPD requires very careful consideration.

Sources

Calne, S.M. et al. (2007). *Psychosocial issues in young-onset Parkinson's disease*.

Calne, S.M. & A. Kumar (2007). *Young-onset Parkinson's disease: Practical management of medical issues*.