

Frequently Asked Questions about Parkinson's Disease

What is Parkinson's Disease?

Parkinson's disease is a disease where cells in a small part of the brain (the substantia nigra) degenerate or die prematurely. This area of the brain is rich in cells that produce a substance called dopamine, which is involved in smooth co-ordinated movement. Loss of these cells results in the three main features, which are:

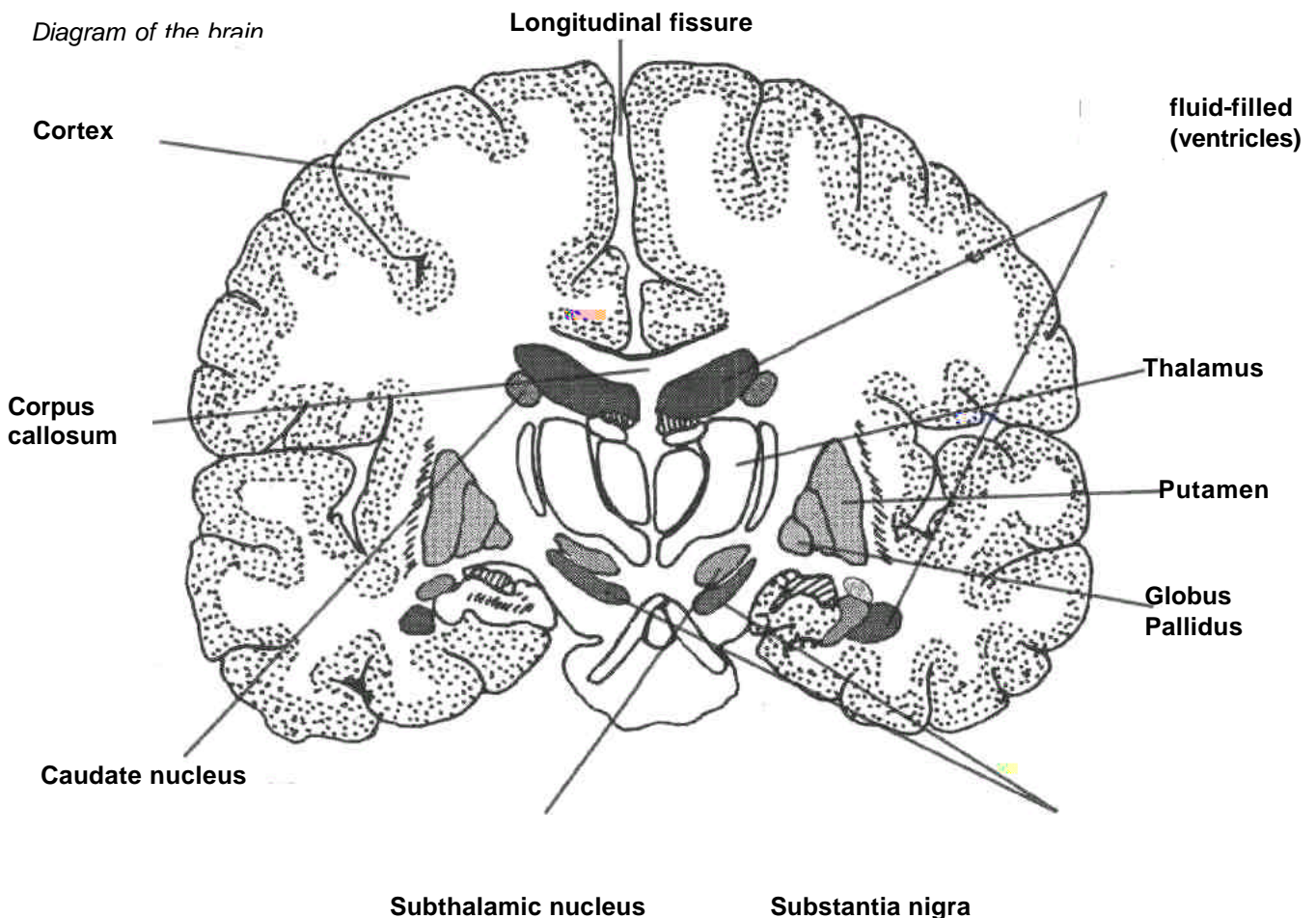
- Tremor
- Stiffness
- Slowness

Each patient is different, so that one patient might have a bad tremor and little else, while another might have hardly any tremor, but feel very stiff and slow. Tremor in one hand is usually the first symptom, but occasionally stiffness and reduced movement of an arm or leg may be the first indication that something is wrong. This may mean that a stroke may be suspected for a while until the picture becomes clearer.

There may be other features present too, such as depression, problems with balance, aching pains, constipation, cramped handwriting and a soft voice.

These symptoms are not confined to pure Parkinson's disease. Other conditions which mimic Parkinson's may be difficult to differentiate in the early stages (Progressive Supranuclear Palsy (PSP), Multiple Systems Atrophy (MSA or Shy Drager), Striatonigral Degeneration and several other rare disorders).

Diagram of the brain



What Causes Parkinson's Disease?

The causes of Parkinson's disease can be divided into

- "**idiopathic**", meaning that there is no known cause (80% of cases)
- "**secondary**", meaning that some other process has damaged the substantia nigra **in** the brain. These could be due to a variety of different causes, such as trauma (as in boxers), infection (as in the cases **of** encephalitis lethargica), medications, toxins, genetic factors **and** others.

Is Parkinson's inherited?

Not usually, but in recent years there has been research into possible genetic influences in Parkinson's. A few genes have been found in certain rare families. Further research is ongoing at . present and there are plans to conduct some genetic studies on Irish patients in the near future.

How common is Parkinson's?

There are about 6,000—7,000 Parkinson's patients currently in Ireland (190 per 100,000 population) with about 700 new cases each year. Although it usually begins somewhere between the ages of 40 and 70, younger adults may be affected too. Men are affected more frequently than women»

What is the prognosis?

Parkinson's certainly alters your life, but it does not usually shorten it. It is a slowly progressive disease, but modern treatments have improved the outlook enormously. Long term prognosis can be optimised by adopting a positive approach to general health and well being (ask for other leaflets in this portfolio e.g. nutrition, fitness etc.)

How will Parkinson's affect me over the years?

Parkinson's is a progressive illness, but it progresses at different rates in different patients. **One** patient may remain fairly stable for years, able to work and continue with his or her usual activities, while another may deteriorate more quickly. As the disease progresses, new symptoms may appear.

Is there a special test for Parkinson's?

There is no specific test at present. The doctor listens to the patient's own story, and makes a diagnosis based on this and the physical examination.

Is there a cure?

Treatments have improved dramatically over the last few years. However, these aim to slow the development of the disease and to improve symptoms, as a cure is not yet available. Major UK research programmes are ongoing and continue to bring about new medical and surgical therapies. It is important to be informed. Contact the Parkinson's Association of Ireland (1800-359359) for details of your local branch. There is a group within it for younger patients called **PALS**.