



Bowel & Bladder Issues in Parkinson's Disease

Understanding Autonomic Symptoms and Practical Ways to Improve Comfort, Dignity, and Daily Life

Bowel and bladder changes are **common, real, and treatable symptoms** of Parkinson's disease. Yet they are often among the least discussed—frequently because they feel private, embarrassing, or unrelated to Parkinson's.

In reality, bowel and bladder symptoms are part of **autonomic nervous system dysfunction**, a core feature of Parkinson's disease. Addressing them directly can significantly improve comfort, sleep, confidence, and quality of life.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals with Parkinson's are encouraged to talk openly about these symptoms and access practical, supportive strategies.

**Bowel and bladder symptoms are not a personal failure.
They are neurological symptoms—and they deserve care.**

Why Parkinson's Affects Bowel & Bladder Function

The autonomic nervous system controls automatic body functions such as digestion, bowel movements, and urination. Parkinson's affects these pathways, leading to changes in how the bowel and bladder signal, store, and empty.

Contributing factors may include:

- Slowed nerve signaling
- Reduced muscle coordination
- Medication effects
- Reduced physical activity
- Changes in hydration or diet

These symptoms often develop gradually and may worsen during medication “off” periods.

Common Bowel Symptoms in Parkinson’s

Constipation

Constipation is one of the **most common non-motor symptoms** of Parkinson’s and may appear years before diagnosis.

Symptoms may include:

- Fewer bowel movements
- Hard or difficult-to-pass stools
- Straining
- Sensation of incomplete emptying
- Bloating or abdominal discomfort

Constipation in Parkinson’s is caused by **slowed gut movement**, not just diet alone.

Managing Constipation at Home

Helpful strategies often include a combination of approaches:

Daily habits

- Adequate hydration throughout the day
- Gradual increase in dietary fiber
- Regular physical activity

Routine strategies

- Establishing a consistent bathroom schedule
- Allowing enough time without rushing
- Responding promptly to the urge to go

Medication review

- Some Parkinson’s medications and other prescriptions can worsen constipation

- Laxatives, stool softeners, or fiber supplements may be recommended by your provider

Managing constipation is foundational—it often improves medication absorption and overall comfort.

Common Bladder Symptoms in Parkinson's

Bladder symptoms are also common and may fluctuate.

Symptoms may include:

- Urinary urgency
- Frequent urination (day or night)
- Nocturia (waking multiple times at night to urinate)
- Difficulty fully emptying the bladder
- Occasional incontinence

These symptoms reflect changes in bladder signaling and control—not loss of willpower.

Managing Bladder Symptoms at Home

Helpful strategies may include:

Fluid timing

- Maintain hydration earlier in the day
- Limit fluids close to bedtime (without dehydration)

Bladder habits

- Scheduled bathroom breaks
- Double voiding (waiting and trying again)
- Pelvic floor awareness

Lifestyle considerations

- Avoid bladder irritants (caffeine, alcohol, artificial sweeteners)
- Address constipation, which can worsen bladder symptoms

The Role of Medications & Therapy

Medical treatment may include:

- Medications to reduce bladder overactivity
- Adjusting Parkinson's medication timing
- Referral to pelvic floor physical therapy
- Evaluation by urology when needed

Bladder medications must be chosen carefully in Parkinson's, especially when cognitive symptoms are present.

Nighttime Impact: Sleep & Safety

Bowel and bladder symptoms often disrupt sleep:

- Frequent nighttime bathroom trips
- Increased fall risk
- Fragmented sleep and fatigue

Helpful safety steps:

- Use nightlights
- Clear pathways to the bathroom
- Consider bedside commodes if needed

Protecting nighttime safety protects independence.

When to Talk With Your Care Team

Contact your provider if you experience:

- Severe or worsening constipation
- Unintentional weight loss
- New bowel accidents

- Pain or blood in stool or urine
- Frequent nighttime urination affecting sleep
- Sudden changes in bladder control

These symptoms are treatable—and should never be ignored.

Preserving Dignity & Quality of Life

Bowel and bladder symptoms can affect confidence, social activity, and emotional well-being. Addressing them allows people to:

- Leave the house more comfortably
- Sleep more soundly
- Feel confident in public settings
- Maintain independence

Comfort and dignity are essential parts of Parkinson's care—not optional extras.

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