



Fighting Parkinson's Disease with Exercise

Movement as Medicine for the Brain, Body, and Spirit

Exercise is one of the **most powerful tools available** to people living with Parkinson's disease. More than symptom management, regular movement acts directly on the brain—supporting dopamine signaling, protecting nerve cells, and improving how the brain and body communicate.

Exercise does not cure Parkinson's—but it **changes the trajectory of living with it**.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals are encouraged to view exercise not as optional fitness, but as **essential neurological care**.

Exercise is not just movement.

It is medicine for the Parkinson's brain.

Why Exercise Matters in Parkinson's Disease

Research consistently shows that regular exercise:

- Improves motor symptoms (balance, walking, stiffness)
- Enhances cognitive function and attention
- Reduces depression and anxiety
- Improves sleep quality
- Supports independence and confidence
- May slow functional decline over time

Exercise supports **neuroplasticity**—the brain's ability to adapt, reorganize, and strengthen connections even in the presence of disease.

How Exercise Affects the Parkinson's Brain

Exercise helps by:

- Increasing dopamine efficiency
- Supporting growth factors that protect neurons
- Reducing inflammation
- Improving blood flow to the brain
- Strengthening brain-body communication

The brain responds to challenge.

Exercise provides that challenge in a healthy way.

Types of Exercise That Benefit Parkinson's

Aerobic Exercise

Supports cardiovascular and brain health.

Examples include:

- Brisk walking
- Cycling
- Swimming
- Dancing

Goal: Elevate heart rate safely and consistently.

Strength Training

Builds muscle to support balance and mobility.

Benefits include:

- Improved posture
- Reduced fall risk
- Greater endurance

- Support for daily activities
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Balance & Gait Training

Targets one of the most critical areas of Parkinson's care.

Helpful approaches include:

- Tai chi
 - Yoga
 - Targeted balance exercises
 - Physical therapy programs
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Parkinson's-Specific Programs

Programs designed for Parkinson's provide targeted benefit.

Examples include:

- Boxing-based programs
- Forced-rate cycling
- Large-amplitude movement training (LSVT BIG)

These programs emphasize **big, intentional movement** to counteract slowness and stiffness.

Exercise & Non-Motor Symptoms

Exercise also helps with:

- Fatigue
- Constipation
- Mood and anxiety
- Cognitive clarity
- Sleep regulation

Movement supports the whole nervous system—not just muscles.

How Much Exercise Is Recommended?

General guidance suggests:

- At least **150 minutes per week** of moderate aerobic activity
- Strength training 2–3 times per week
- Balance or flexibility training several times per week

Consistency matters more than intensity.

Doing something regularly is more powerful than doing everything perfectly.

Starting or Returning to Exercise Safely

Helpful tips:

- Start where you are—not where you think you “should” be
- Choose activities you enjoy
- Exercise during medication “on” times when possible
- Warm up and cool down
- Rest when needed

A physical therapist with Parkinson’s experience can help create a safe, individualized plan.

Overcoming Common Barriers

“I’m Too Tired”

Fatigue often improves with regular movement.

“I’m Afraid of Falling”

Supervised or seated exercise still provides benefit.

“I’ve Never Exercised”

It is **never too late** to start.

“I Don’t Have Time”

Short bouts of movement still count.

Any movement is better than none.

Emotional & Psychological Benefits of Exercise

Exercise provides:

- A sense of control
- Confidence and empowerment
- Stress relief
- Social connection when done in groups

Many people describe exercise as a way to **fight back—actively and positively.**

When to Talk With Your Care Team

Discuss exercise plans if:

- You’ve had recent falls
 - You experience severe fatigue or pain
 - You’re starting a new, intense program
 - Symptoms suddenly change
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A Reframing of “Fighting” Parkinson’s

Fighting Parkinson’s does not mean forcing your body beyond limits.

It means showing up, moving with intention, and choosing engagement over withdrawal—again and again.

Exercise is one of the most hopeful, evidence-based ways to do that.
