



Movement, Balance & Walking: Supporting Safety, Confidence, and Mobility in Everyday Life

Movement changes are often one of the earliest and most noticeable parts of Parkinson's disease. Walking may feel slower or less automatic. Balance may feel less reliable. Tasks that once required no thought—standing up, turning, stepping over obstacles—may now require intention and focus.

These changes can be frustrating and sometimes frightening. But movement in Parkinson's is **not lost**—it becomes **different**. With the right strategies, practice, and support, many people improve confidence, reduce falls, and continue moving safely and purposefully.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals with Parkinson's have access to practical, real-world tools for maintaining mobility and independence.

**Movement in Parkinson's is not about speed or perfection.
It is about intention, rhythm, and confidence.**

How Parkinson's Affects Movement & Balance

Parkinson's changes how the brain initiates and coordinates movement. Signals that once flowed automatically now require more conscious effort.

Common movement and balance challenges include:

- Slowness of movement (bradykinesia)
- Muscle stiffness or rigidity
- Shortened steps or shuffling gait
- Reduced arm swing
- Difficulty starting or stopping walking
- Balance instability or near-falls
- Freezing of gait (feet feel "stuck")

These symptoms can fluctuate throughout the day and are often influenced by medication timing, fatigue, stress, and environment. Difficulty walking does **not** mean weakness—it reflects how Parkinson’s affects brain signaling.

Walking With Intention

Walking with Parkinson’s often improves when it becomes **intentional rather than automatic**.

Helpful strategies include:

- Thinking “big steps” or “heel first”
- Standing tall and widening stance slightly
- Allowing extra time to initiate movement
- Pausing before turns rather than rushing
- Focusing attention on the act of walking

Slowing down to move *more deliberately* often improves safety and fluidity.

Managing Freezing of Gait

Freezing of gait can feel sudden and unsettling, but it is manageable with practice.

Common triggers include:

- Doorways and narrow spaces
- Turning or pivoting
- Multitasking while walking
- Stress or feeling rushed

Helpful cueing strategies:

- Rhythmic cues (music, metronome, counting)
- Visual cues (stepping over a line or object)
- Weight-shifting side to side before stepping
- Saying a verbal cue such as “step”

Freezing is a brain signal issue—not a loss of ability.
Cues help bypass the stuck signal.

Balance & Fall Prevention

Balance changes in Parkinson's increase fall risk, but balance can be trained and strengthened.

Strategies that support balance include:

- Balance-focused exercise programs
- Strengthening legs and core muscles
- Practicing safe turning techniques
- Removing home hazards (loose rugs, clutter)
- Using assistive devices when recommended

Using support—such as a cane, walker, or trekking poles—is a **safety tool**, not a setback.

The Role of Physical Therapy

Physical therapy is one of the most effective interventions for movement and walking in Parkinson's.

A Parkinson's-informed physical therapist can help with:

- Gait training and stride length
- Balance strategies and fall recovery
- Freezing management
- Strength and flexibility
- Confidence with movement

Early referral to PT often leads to better long-term outcomes.

Exercise as a Movement Treatment

Exercise is not optional in Parkinson's—it is therapeutic.

Regular movement has been shown to:

- Improve walking speed and balance
- Reduce stiffness
- Support brain health
- Improve confidence and mood
- Maintain independence longer

Helpful exercise types include:

- Walking programs
- Strength training
- Balance and agility work
- Parkinson’s-specific exercise classes
- Activities you enjoy and will continue

Consistency matters more than intensity. The best exercise is the one you’ll keep doing.

Adapting to Daily Movement Changes

Movement needs change from day to day—and that’s okay.

Helpful daily adaptations:

- Plan walking during stronger medication “on” times
- Avoid rushing or multitasking while walking
- Use supportive footwear
- Take breaks before fatigue sets in
- Ask for help when needed

Adapting how you move allows you to continue doing what matters.

When to Seek Additional Support

Contact your care team if you notice:

- Increased falls or near-falls
- Worsening freezing of gait
- Sudden changes in balance
- New fear of walking or leaving home
- Increased stiffness that limits function

Early intervention often prevents injury and builds confidence.

You Are Not Walking This Path Alone

Movement challenges can feel isolating—but support changes everything.

WPA provides:

- Education on movement strategies
- Referrals to Parkinson’s-informed programs
- Exercise and wellness resources
- Community support and encouragement

Confidence grows when knowledge and support are present.

A Final Message

Movement may feel different—but it is still yours.

With intention, practice, and the right support, people with Parkinson’s continue to walk, move, adapt, and live fully.

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