



Sleep & Parkinson's Disease

Understanding Sleep Changes and Supporting Restful, Safer Nights

Sleep problems are extremely common in Parkinson's disease and can affect energy, movement, thinking, mood, and overall quality of life. For many people, sleep changes are among the most disruptive—and least talked about—symptoms of Parkinson's.

Sleep issues in Parkinson's are **neurological**, not simply "poor sleep habits." Understanding why sleep changes occur and how to address them can significantly improve both nighttime rest and daytime function.

Through the **Wisconsin Parkinson Association**, individuals and families can access education and tools to improve sleep safety, comfort, and confidence.

**Good sleep is not a luxury in Parkinson's.
It is a foundation for daily function and brain health.**

Why Sleep Changes Occur in Parkinson's

Parkinson's affects brain regions that regulate:

- Sleep–wake cycles
- Muscle relaxation during sleep
- Dream regulation
- Autonomic functions such as blood pressure and breathing

Contributors to sleep disruption may include:

- Nighttime stiffness or tremor
- Medication wearing off overnight
- REM Sleep Behavior Disorder (RBD)
- Restless legs or periodic limb movements

- Anxiety or depression
- Frequent urination
- Pain or discomfort

Sleep changes often involve **multiple factors at once**, which is why a comprehensive approach is helpful.

Common Sleep Challenges in Parkinson's

Difficulty Falling or Staying Asleep (Insomnia)

- Trouble falling asleep
- Frequent nighttime awakenings
- Early morning waking

REM Sleep Behavior Disorder (RBD)

- Acting out dreams
- Talking, yelling, or moving during sleep
- Risk of injury to self or bed partner

Excessive Daytime Sleepiness

- Feeling overly sleepy during the day
- Unintended naps
- Difficulty staying alert

Restless Legs & Nighttime Movement

- Urge to move legs
- Discomfort or crawling sensations
- Fragmented sleep

Sleep symptoms may fluctuate and often interact with medication timing and daytime fatigue.

How Sleep Problems Are Evaluated

Sleep concerns are usually evaluated through:

- Careful history and symptom discussion
- Bed partner observations
- Medication review
- Sleep questionnaires

In some cases, a **sleep study (polysomnography)** may be recommended to:

- Confirm REM Sleep Behavior Disorder
- Identify sleep apnea
- Rule out seizures or other conditions

A sleep study is noninvasive and provides valuable guidance for treatment.

Treating Sleep Problems in Parkinson's

Treatment is individualized and may include **medication adjustments, targeted sleep medications, and home-based strategies.**

Medication Approaches

Depending on symptoms, providers may recommend:

- Adjusting Parkinson's medication timing
- Melatonin or other sleep-supporting medications
- Medications to reduce dream enactment behaviors
- Treatment for restless legs or sleep apnea

Sleep treatment aims to improve safety and rest—not to eliminate dreaming or sedate unnecessarily.

Managing Sleep at Home: Practical Strategies

Support a Consistent Sleep Schedule

- Go to bed and wake at the same times daily

- Keep weekends consistent when possible

Create a Parkinson's-Friendly Sleep Environment

- Cool, dark, and quiet bedroom
- Comfortable mattress and pillows
- Clear pathways for nighttime bathroom trips

Reduce Nighttime Disruptions

- Limit caffeine later in the day
- Avoid alcohol near bedtime
- Address pain, stiffness, or bladder symptoms with your provider

Safety Strategies for Nighttime Symptoms

For individuals with RBD or nighttime movement:

- Remove sharp or breakable items near the bed
- Consider lowering the bed or placing a mattress beside it
- Use nightlights to prevent falls
- Discuss safe sleep arrangements if bed partner safety is a concern

Nighttime safety planning protects rest, dignity, and relationships.

Daytime Habits That Improve Nighttime Sleep

What happens during the day affects sleep at night.

Helpful habits include:

- Regular physical activity
- Exposure to natural daylight
- Structured daily routines
- Managing fatigue without excessive napping

Short, planned naps may be helpful—long or late naps often worsen nighttime sleep.

When to Talk With Your Care Team

Contact your provider if:

- Sleep problems persist or worsen
- Injuries occur during sleep
- Daytime sleepiness interferes with safety
- Confusion, hallucinations, or memory changes appear
- Bed partner safety is a concern

Sleep issues are treatable and should not be minimized.

Living Well with Sleep Changes

Many people with Parkinson's experience meaningful improvement in sleep when symptoms are recognized and addressed.

Better sleep supports better movement, clearer thinking, steadier mood, and greater resilience.

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