Mobility and Fall Prevention for Residents Living with Parkinson's

A Training Guide for Assisted Living and Long-Term Care Staff

Parkinson's disease affects the brain systems responsible for movement, balance, coordination, and posture. These changes can make walking and transferring more difficult and can increase the risk of falls.

Falls are one of the most common causes of injury and hospitalization for individuals living with Parkinson's. However, with proper awareness and supportive care practices, facility staff can play a critical role in helping residents maintain mobility, independence, and safety.

Why Fall Risk Is Higher in Parkinson's

Parkinson's affects dopamine pathways in the brain that help regulate smooth, automatic movement. As dopamine levels decrease, movement becomes slower, less coordinated, and more effortful.

Residents may experience:

- **Bradykinesia (slowness of movement)**
- **Rigidity (muscle stiffness)**
- **Postural instability (impaired balance reflexes)**
- **Difficulty initiating movement**
- **Short, shuffling steps**
- **Reduced arm swing**
- **Stooped posture**

These changes can make it harder to maintain balance, adjust posture, or recover from a stumble.

Common Mobility Challenges in Parkinson's

Understanding the movement patterns associated with Parkinson's helps staff provide safer assistance.

Freezing of Gait

Freezing occurs when the brain temporarily cannot initiate movement, causing the resident to feel as if their feet are **"glued to the floor."**

Freezing commonly occurs:

- When starting to walk
- During turning
- When approaching doorways
- In crowded spaces
- When feeling rushed or anxious

Residents may attempt to step but be unable to move forward.

Helpful Staff Strategies

- Encourage the resident to **pause and reset**
- Use verbal cues such as **"take a big step" or "march your feet"**
- Encourage stepping over an **imaginary line or target**
- Avoid pulling or pushing the resident

Allowing a moment for the brain to "restart" movement can often resolve freezing episodes.

Difficulty Turning

Turning requires coordination and balance, which can be impaired in Parkinson's.

Residents who attempt to pivot quickly may lose balance.

Safer Turning Strategy

Encourage residents to:

- **Turn slowly in a wide arc**
- Take **multiple small steps instead of pivoting**

This technique improves stability and reduces fall risk.

Changes in Walking Pattern

Parkinson's commonly causes gait changes, including:

• Shorter step length
• Shuffling steps
• Reduced arm swing
• Stooped posture
• Difficulty stopping or starting movement

Residents may appear to **accelerate unintentionally**, known as **festination**, where steps become faster and shorter.

These changes can increase fall risk if not recognized.

Environmental Factors That Increase Fall Risk

Even minor environmental barriers can make walking more difficult for residents with Parkinson's.

Common hazards include:

• Clutter in hallways
• Loose rugs or uneven flooring
• Poor lighting
• Narrow pathways
• Crowded spaces
• Sudden obstacles

Best Practice

Maintain **clear, well-lit walking paths** and minimize environmental obstacles whenever possible.

Supporting Safe Transfers

Transfers such as standing from a chair or moving from bed to wheelchair may be challenging for residents with Parkinson's due to slowed movement and muscle stiffness.

Helpful Transfer Techniques

Encourage residents to:

1. **Scoot forward to the edge of the chair**

2. **Place feet flat on the floor under the body**
3. **Lean forward slightly**
4. **Push up slowly using the arms of the chair**

Allow the resident adequate time to complete the movement safely.

Rushing transfers can increase fall risk.

Medication Timing and Mobility

Mobility in Parkinson's often fluctuates throughout the day depending on medication effectiveness.

When medications are working well, residents may move more easily. When medication levels drop, residents may experience **"OFF periods."**

During OFF periods, residents may have:

• Increased stiffness
• Difficulty initiating movement
• Slower walking
• Freezing episodes
• Increased fall risk

Parkinson's medications should generally be administered **within 15 minutes of the scheduled time** to help maintain stable symptom control.

If staff observe predictable times when mobility worsens, these observations should be shared with nursing staff and the resident's provider. Medication timing adjustments may help improve mobility.

Encouraging Safe Physical Activity

Regular movement is one of the most beneficial strategies for maintaining mobility in Parkinson's.

Exercise supports:

• Strength
• Balance
• Flexibility

• Coordination
• Mood and overall well-being

Residents may benefit from activities such as:

• Walking programs
• Physical therapy
• Parkinson's exercise classes
• Chair exercises
• Stretching programs

Encouraging safe daily movement can help maintain functional ability.

Warning Signs That Should Be Reported

Staff should notify nursing staff or the provider if they observe:

• Repeated falls
• Sudden decline in walking ability
• Increased freezing episodes
• Difficulty standing from a chair
• Increased imbalance
• Changes in posture or gait pattern

These changes may indicate medication adjustments, illness, infection, or other medical concerns.

Supporting Residents Living With Parkinson's

Residents living with Parkinson's benefit from a care approach that emphasizes **patience, awareness, and supportive movement strategies**.

Facility staff can make a meaningful difference by:

• Allowing extra time for movement
• Encouraging intentional walking and posture
• Maintaining safe walking environments
• Monitoring medication timing
• Communicating mobility changes promptly

Small adjustments in daily care can significantly improve safety, confidence, and quality of life.

Wisconsin Parkinson Association

The **Wisconsin Parkinson Association (WPA)** provides education, resources, and training materials for healthcare professionals and care facilities supporting individuals living with Parkinson's.

To learn more about Parkinson's care resources and education, visit:

wiparkinson.org