Supporting Activities of Daily Living in Parkinson's

Practical Tips for Professional Caregivers

Dressing, Eating, Mobility, and Toileting

Parkinson's disease can affect coordination, balance, muscle control, and the speed at which a person can perform everyday tasks. Activities of daily living (ADLs) such as dressing, eating, walking, and using the bathroom may take longer and require thoughtful support.

Professional caregivers play an important role in helping individuals remain **as independent as possible while maintaining safety and dignity**.

Small adjustments in how tasks are approached can make daily routines much easier.

General ADL Care Principles

When supporting individuals living with Parkinson's, a few core principles are helpful across all daily activities.

Allow extra time
Parkinson's slows movement and processing speed. Rushing increases anxiety and can worsen symptoms such as freezing.

Use simple verbal cues
Clear prompts such as "take a big step," "lean forward," or "finish this bite before the next one" can help initiate movement.

Break tasks into steps
Complex tasks may become easier when broken into smaller actions.

Encourage participation
Provide assistance only when needed so individuals can remain involved in their care.

Maintain calm communication
Stress and urgency can worsen Parkinson's symptoms. A calm environment supports better movement and cooperation.

Dressing Support

Dressing often becomes more challenging due to stiffness, reduced flexibility, and difficulty with fine motor skills.

Common Challenges

- Difficulty manipulating buttons or zippers
- Trouble lifting arms to put on shirts
- Balance issues when standing to dress
- Slowed movements

Helpful Strategies

Professional caregivers can support independence by:

- Encouraging dressing **while seated** to improve balance
- Laying clothing out in the order it will be worn
- Choosing clothing with **elastic waistbands, Velcro, or magnetic closures**
- Offering long-handled shoehorns or sock aids if available
- Encouraging the person to **lean forward before standing to pull up pants**

Allowing the person to complete as much of the task as possible helps maintain independence.

Eating and Mealtime Support

Parkinson's can affect coordination, tremor control, and swallowing. Eating may take longer and require minor adaptations.

Common Challenges

- Tremor affecting utensils
- Difficulty cutting food
- Slower chewing and swallowing
- Fatigue during meals
- Food spilling from utensils

Helpful Strategies

Professional caregivers can support safe and independent eating by:

- Providing a **calm, unhurried eating environment**
- Encouraging **small bites and sips**
- Offering **weighted utensils or utensils with larger handles** if needed
- Using **non-slip placemats or dishes with raised edges**
- Ensuring the individual is **sitting upright during meals**

Allowing adequate time for meals helps reduce choking risk and frustration.

Mobility During Daily Activities

Daily routines such as moving between rooms, getting out of bed, or standing from a chair can become more difficult.

Helpful Mobility Tips

Professional caregivers can assist mobility by:

- Allowing time for the individual to initiate movement
- Encouraging **large, intentional steps**
- Providing simple cues such as “stand tall” or “take a big step”
- Avoiding pulling or rushing the individual
- Ensuring walking paths are clear and well lit

If freezing occurs, encouraging the individual to **pause, shift weight, and then step forward** may help restart movement.

Toileting Challenges in Parkinson’s

Toileting can be particularly difficult due to mobility changes, slowed movement, bladder urgency, and difficulty managing clothing.

Common toileting challenges include:

- Difficulty getting to the bathroom quickly enough
- Trouble turning or positioning near the toilet
- Difficulty pulling clothing up or down
- Increased nighttime bathroom trips
- Urinary urgency or incontinence

In Parkinson's disease, **bladder urgency can also worsen freezing of gait**. When the brain senses an urgent need to reach the bathroom, the pressure to move quickly can increase anxiety and stress. This often disrupts the brain's movement signals and may trigger freezing episodes, particularly near the bathroom doorway or when turning to sit on the toilet.

Doorways and tight spaces are among the most common places freezing occurs, and bathrooms are often one of the highest fall-risk locations for individuals living with Parkinson's.

Professional caregivers should approach toileting assistance with patience, privacy, and calm reassurance.

Supporting Mobility During Urgency

When a person with Parkinson's is experiencing bladder urgency, rushing them may actually worsen mobility.

Helpful strategies include:

• Encouraging the person to **pause briefly if freezing occurs**
• Using simple cues such as **"take a big step" or "march your feet"**
• Remaining calm and reassuring
• Avoiding pulling or rushing the individual forward
• Ensuring the walking path to the bathroom is clear and well lit

A calm and steady approach helps reduce anxiety and may help the person restart movement more easily.

Encouraging Regular Bathroom Schedules

Scheduled bathroom visits can help reduce urgency and accidents.

For many individuals, going every **2–3 hours during the day** may help reduce sudden urgency that can trigger freezing episodes.

Professional caregivers can support this by:

• Offering regular reminders
• Assisting with timely bathroom access
• Monitoring for patterns of urgency throughout the day

Reducing urgency can significantly improve both **mobility safety and fall prevention**.

Toileting Safety and Assistance Tips

Support Safe Transfers

When assisting someone to sit on the toilet:

- Encourage them to **back up until they feel the toilet behind their legs**
- Remind them to **reach back for support before sitting**
- Encourage slow, controlled movements

Grab bars or raised toilet seats may improve safety.

Assist With Clothing Management

Fine motor difficulties may make it harder to manage clothing.

Helpful strategies include:

- Using **elastic waistbands** instead of buttons or belts
- Allowing the person to sit while adjusting clothing
- Providing gentle cueing rather than immediately taking over the task

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Nighttime Toileting Safety

Individuals with Parkinson's may wake frequently at night to use the bathroom.

Professional caregivers should ensure:

- Adequate night lighting
- Clear pathways to the bathroom
- Access to mobility aids

In some situations, a **bedside commode** may improve nighttime safety.

Maintaining Dignity During Personal Care

Personal care activities can be sensitive for individuals living with Parkinson's.

Professional caregivers should:

• Maintain privacy whenever possible
• Explain what assistance is being provided
• Encourage participation in tasks
• Respect personal routines and preferences

Preserving dignity is essential for emotional well-being.

When to Report Changes to the Healthcare Team

Professional caregivers should notify the healthcare team if they observe:

• Sudden changes in mobility
• Increased falls
• New swallowing difficulty
• Frequent choking during meals
• Sudden changes in bladder control
• Difficulty completing basic daily activities

These changes may indicate medication adjustments or additional therapy support is needed.

Wisconsin Parkinson Association

The **Wisconsin Parkinson Association (WPA)** provides education, resources, and support for professional caregivers, healthcare professionals, and individuals living with Parkinson's.

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

wiparkinson.org