



Understanding Freezing of Gait in Parkinson's

What Facility Staff Should Do

Freezing of gait is a common movement symptom in Parkinson's disease where a person temporarily feels **unable to move their feet forward despite intending to walk**. Residents often describe this sensation as feeling like their feet are **"glued to the floor."**

Freezing episodes can be frustrating, frightening, and may increase the risk of falls. With the right understanding and support, staff can help residents safely move through these episodes.

What Freezing Looks Like

During a freezing episode, a resident may:

- Appear stuck in place when trying to begin walking
- Take very small or shuffling steps
- Have difficulty turning or changing direction
- Hesitate at doorways or narrow spaces
- Rock back and forth without moving forward

Freezing can last **a few seconds to several minutes**.

Residents are usually **aware of the problem and trying to move**, which can make the experience very stressful.

Common Triggers for Freezing

Freezing often occurs during situations that require changes in movement or increased concentration.

Common triggers include:

- Starting to walk
- Turning or pivoting
- Approaching doorways or hallways
- Walking in crowded spaces
- Feeling rushed or pressured
- Anxiety or stress
- Medication wearing off

Recognizing these triggers can help staff anticipate when freezing may occur.

Why Freezing Happens

Parkinson's affects the brain circuits responsible for **automatic movement and movement initiation**.

When these circuits are disrupted, the brain may temporarily struggle to send the signal to begin or continue walking.

Stress, multitasking, or sudden environmental changes can make this process even more difficult.

The Importance of a Calm Approach

When a resident experiences freezing, the response from staff can strongly influence how quickly the episode resolves.

If staff appear rushed, stressed, or frustrated, the resident's anxiety may increase. Anxiety can worsen Parkinson's symptoms and make it harder for the brain to restart movement.

A calm and supportive approach helps the resident regain control.

Best Practice for Staff

Before approaching a resident who is struggling with movement:

- Pause and take a slow breath
- Approach calmly and speak in a reassuring tone
- Avoid rushing or pulling the resident
- Offer simple cues such as **“take a big step”** or **“march your feet”**

Residents often take emotional cues from those assisting them. A calm environment helps reduce anxiety and improves the chances of overcoming freezing.

Staff should **check their stress at the door** before assisting in challenging mobility situations.

What Staff Should Do During a Freezing Episode

If a resident becomes frozen while walking:

1. Encourage the resident to pause

Stopping briefly can allow the brain to reset movement signals.

2. Use simple verbal cues

Helpful phrases include:

- “Take a big step.”
- “March your feet.”
- “Step over an imaginary line.”

3. Encourage weight shifting

Gently shifting weight from one foot to the other may help restart movement.

4. Avoid pulling the resident forward

Pulling can disrupt balance and increase fall risk.

5. Allow time

Freezing episodes often resolve within seconds when the resident is given time and reassurance.

Environmental Strategies That Help

Facilities can reduce freezing triggers by:

- Keeping hallways clear and uncluttered
- Ensuring good lighting
- Allowing adequate space for turning
- Reducing rushed transitions between activities

Predictable and calm environments support safer mobility.

Medication Timing and Freezing

Freezing episodes may increase during “**OFF periods**”, when Parkinson’s medications begin to wear off.

If staff observe freezing happening at certain times of day, they should:

- Document the timing of the episode
- Share observations with nursing staff
- Notify the resident’s provider if patterns develop

Medication timing adjustments may help improve mobility.

When to Notify Nursing Staff

Staff should report:

- Frequent freezing episodes
- Increased falls related to freezing
- Sudden changes in walking ability
- Freezing that does not improve with cueing

These changes may indicate medication adjustments or further evaluation is needed.

Supporting Residents Living with Parkinson’s

Freezing can be frustrating for residents, but with patience and understanding, staff can help residents move safely and maintain confidence.

Helpful approaches include:

- Remaining calm and supportive
- Allowing extra time for movement
- Using simple cues to guide movement
- Creating safe, uncluttered environments

Your approach can make a meaningful difference in helping residents regain mobility.

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

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