

What I Tell My Patients

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COVID-19 and Parkinson's Disease

Most of you are rightly concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic, and our lack of knowledge regarding its potential effect on ourselves, the people we love and our general community. That concern has been magnified, and sometimes converted into outright fear, by dire predictions about a lack of access to proper health care, if and when it becomes necessary.

For people with Parkinson's disease, the good news is that SARS-CoV-2 (the virus responsible for COVID-19) is not known to get into the central nervous system. There is no reason to believe that anyone with PD is at greater risk than anyone without of contracting COVID-19.

We are in the early days of this pandemic, and there is much that we do not yet know, but we can make some predictions regarding the interaction of COVID-19 and Parkinson's disease based on our limited knowledge of the former, and our experience with PD and other infectious illnesses.

What could be the effect of having PD if you do develop COVID-19, which mainly targets the respiratory system, especially the lungs? Some people with PD have reduced breathing strength due to their inability to generate a normal breathing effort, or restricted lung capacity due to changes in posture; having these PD features may interfere with the ability to cough effectively enough to clear the airways. People with swallowing difficulties may have an increased risk of pneumonia. Also, COVID-19 has a nasty predisposition to produce more severe complications in older individuals, which unfortunately overlaps with much of the PD community. Otherwise, people with PD are not expected to suffer any more serious effects of COVID-19 than people without, although the above factors do add to the urgency of prevention among people with PD.

Regarding the possible effect of COVID-19 on PD, as many of you know, medical illnesses and infections that do not directly affect the nervous system, such as urinary tract infections and pneumonias, can still lead to a temporary worsening of symptoms of PD. The mechanism is not known, but it happens often enough that an unexplained deterioration in PD symptoms often prompts laboratory investigations designed to uncover a hidden infection.

COVID-19 also has rapidly acquired the ability to provoke great anxiety and stress among unaffected individuals, because of its risk of severe illness and mortality and its newness; this novelty leads to finding ourselves in the time gap between the initial recognition of a disease and the subsequent development of effective treatment. Anxiety is a common non-motor symptom of PD, so people with PD are more vulnerable to developing or aggravating it. Another source of stress is the fact that many people with

PD already feel personally isolated under regular conditions, and current recommendations regarding “social distancing” and “shelter at home” only reinforce this underappreciated aspect of having PD. Many of you already know that stress and anxiety can lead to prominent aggravation of PD symptoms.

So it is possible to feel like your PD symptoms are worse due to COVID-19, either as a result of actual infection, or worrying about acquiring it, or a depressed mood from lack of interaction with others. However, it is important to remember that all of these negative effects of infection, stress and anxiety are temporary and reversible. Once the worst of the pandemic has passed through and life slowly returns to relative normalcy, panicked behavior will diminish and our collective mood will brighten. And that should begin to alleviate the stress that is keenly felt by people with PD, and relieve any increase in symptoms that may have resulted.

We will accumulate more knowledge as time goes on and scientists have the opportunity to study the effects of COVID-19 more closely. Treatment will be developed; a vaccine will eventually be available. The general level of unease and uncertainty, the doom and gloom and apprehension we now feel, will gradually dissipate.

For now, people with PD should stay in frequent social touch by telephone or online. Make sure your medication and food supplies are adequate, and take advantage of delivery services. Keep exercising. Try to not to cross the line between staying updated on new developments in the COVID-19 story and obsessing over the illness. Follow the same precautions as everyone else: stay away from people you do not live with (people do not have to be sick to transmit the virus), and wash your hands thoroughly (you might be surprised how long 20 seconds take when washing hands; try timing yourself once) at every opportunity. These are effective measures that have already worked for people elsewhere (notably Singapore and Hong Kong), and they should work for you too.

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